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Wildcat Bob, the Boss Bruiser.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.



Wildcat Bob, THE BOSS BRUISER; OR, THE BORDER BLOODHOUNDS.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.

CHAPTER I.

A TERRIBLE INITIATION.

THE sun was rising in the east like a ball of molten gold, and shedding its first dazzling rays over a vast level plain in Western Kansas.

The time was mid-spring, and glorious nature was fairly putting forth her grandest efforts to render the earth a perfect paradise.

The grass was a carpet of vivid emerald, and here and there the sunlight reflected against a solitary tree, just nodding proudly 'neath its coat of fresh, dew-besprinkled leaves. Birds were filling the air with their sweet melody, as they flitted gayly hither and thither, gathering the honey from many a wild *siesta* and honeysuckle; buffaloes were grazing their way by degrees toward the glistening waters of the Smoky Hill river, and the antelope, with the frisking fawn, was standing staring with distended orbs toward the north-west, where a party of horsemen had halted.

There were sixteen of them—all ruffianly-looking fellows, mounted on swift steeds, and armed with rifles, revolvers and knives.

The spot where they had halted was the end of an uncompleted railroad, and here were many evidences of what had been, and yet what was not to be.

Decayed ties lay scattered about; rusty nails and half a keg of spikes were just where they had been left when work was suspended, in consequence of a failure in the company's finances. Here a shovel, there a pick; here a sledge, and there a broken coupling of a car; and most conspicuous of all, a heavy box freight-car stood by one side of the track.

This had been converted into a habitation, apparently, for a spiral cloud of smoke curled upward through a hole in the roof. Also, an old, repulsive-looking wretch was sitting in the open door, with his legs dangling down toward the ground, engaged in sucking the smoke out of a venerable greasy pipe.

It was before him that the horsemen had halted, and a grim, triumphant smile overspread his face as the leader said:

"Well?"

"It's all hunky," quoth the other. "I got the gal last night, up in Marriottville, and now I'm ready to jine ye."

"Good. You have out to fulfill the necessary requirements, and you become a member of the Bloodhound Band. Are you ready?"

"Jes' so. Bring forth yer hoss."

At a word from the leader, who was a man of portly figure, and whose face was hidden behind a thick veil, a strong, wiry mustang was led out from among the crowd.

The old man, then, by a straining exertion, drew his legs up into the car, and disappeared from view.

Not long was he gone, however, for he soon came back, carrying in his long, muscular arms a figure wrapped in an immense skin cloak. This he gave into the arms of the leader, while he clambered into the saddle of the riderless steed.

"Ha!" ejaculated the leader, as, pushing away the cloak from the face of the figure, he beheld a picture of fresh young beauty, such as he had never seen before; "she is very pretty."

"Bet yer dudads she is. Et ar' a pity to take such a gal like she."

"Pity! man, are you crazy? What is a trifling amount of beauty to your *revenge*—sweet revenge? Were she the finest lady in the world, my purpose could not be altered in the least. Here, take her, and let's be off!"

The old man took the apparently lifeless form across his saddle-bows, and then the whole party turned their horses toward the north, and galloped away.

The strange commander took the lead, and he was followed by his comrades and the old man.

All day they kept steadily on, and as the sun was sinking in the west, they came to a halt in a belt of timber, through which ran the Kansas Pacific railroad. Here the order to halt and dismount was given and fulfilled, with alacrity.

The spot was a wild one in the extreme. The railroad cut down through a wild woodland gorge, fringed on either side by towering pines, and was rough, uneven and uninviting. The westward bound train generally wild-catted it through this place in order to make a steep grade a half-mile beyond, and would stop only at danger signals.

"This is our destination," said the leader, as he leaped from his saddle. "More than one of my Bloodhounds have here proved their courage, Jake Corrigan, and you have the same opportunity as they!"

The old man nodded with a repulsive leer, and dismounted.

"Ye needn't fear fer me, colon'l," he replied,

as he laid his unconscious burden on a heap of leaves which the wind had whirled together at the foot of a tree. "Jake Corrigan's got the nerve to do wuss jobs nor w'ot's comin' to-night. W'en he's got sech a lift ahead as j'inin' yer band, ye'll find 'im all nerve an' muscle; tho' et ar' hard tew kill sech a promisin' gal!"

"Bah! you are chicken-hearted. But, never mind, my man. It will all be over in no time, and besides making yourself a member among us, you also prove yourself a man who will falter at nothing which will achieve success for our brotherhood."

"Yas, thar's shuvvelfuls o' truth in thet, sir. Onc't git me 'initiated, an' I'll stick ter ye like tar-'n'-feathers!"

"I believe you. Now, all hands to work and prepare your grub. It lacks ten minutes of eight o'clock. The westward bound express passes here at eleven, precise."

So saying the masked leader took a package of dried venison from his saddle-bags, and seating himself on the grass, proceeded to do justice to a large meal.

His companions did likewise, but old Jake Corrigan refused to eat. Instead, he sat by the side of the unconscious girl like a watchful demon, and when she would show any signs of returning life, he would drop a small portion of liquid from a vial between her parched lips.

Night fell dark and threatening over the earth. Heavy, ominous black clouds skurried across the face of the heavens; the rumble of thunder seemed to jar the very air, and forked tongues of hissing lightning darted down toward the earth. It was only too evident that a furious storm was soon to break out.

Most of the band were clustered in groups, near the railroad track, conversing in an undertone, for the roaring and flashing of God's artillery caused them to shrink in awe, heartless, blood-stained ruffians though they were. They, in moments like this, feared the mighty power of Him whose laws they scorned and cursed at other times.

The masked leader sat in silence where he had partaken his meal, his thoughts seemingly far away, for he noticed naught about him. Old Jake Corrigan kept a silent vigil over his charge, and ever and anon as an awful peal of thunder would fairly make the earth tremble, and a vivid glare of lightning would fan his bronzed cheeks, he would glance nervously about and shudder.

The hours wore swiftly away, and though no rain fell, the warring of the sky-batteries continued with even greater force and power.

At last the masked leader was seen to spring to his feet, and his comrades involuntarily drew near.

"Bloodhounds!" he said, in a cold, stern voice, "we have here an applicant for initiation into our circle—a man whose name has long been outlawed in Kansas, and one whom we have concluded to take as a brother to our hearts—the accessory to our plots and plans. Therefore it behooves us to see that his courage and nerve lack not. Do I speak aright?"

"Ay! ay!" came from a dozen throats.

"Then, Jacob Corrigan, are you ready to fulfill your part?"

"I am!" said the old ruffian, as he regained his feet. But that his voice was hoarse, and that he trembled in every joint did not escape the commander's notice.

"No faltering!" he cried, fiercely. "If you hesitate or offer to back out, I, myself, will shoot you through the heart!"

"Do not fear for me!" was Corrigan's reply, as he gave vent to a terrible laugh. "Ef I don't go thru wi' my part, ye kin plug it to me all ye're worth."

"Good. You begin to talk like a man. You took our oath three days ago. Do you wish to repeat it now?"

"Jes' 's ye say 'bout that!"

"Ha! there is the down-brakes whistle of the express. Never mind the oath now, but get to your work!"

Without a word Jake Corrigan advanced to where he had left the maiden, and picked her up in his long arms. He then led the way to the railroad, whither he was followed by the base wretches, one of whom he was soon to become.

The blackness was most intense, and it was only by a sense of feeling that the track could be found.

With great precision Jake Corrigan laid the neck of his fair young victim across the rail, so that the wheels of the approaching train would pass over it. A grunt of approval from the leader pronounced the arrangement correct.

Then, there beneath the black pall of a wild, awful night, with its deafening thunder that jarred the earth like an earthquake, and the blinding glare of sharp lightning, those seventeen hard-hearted, pitiless wretches waited the approach of the through express, whose headlight gleamed like a dim star, far away toward the east.

Nearer and nearer it came, clouds of sparks flying from the smoke-stack, and the roar of the wheels on the steel-shod rails outdoing that of the rumbling thunder.

The train was coming on at lightning speed, in order to make the heavy grade beyond.

Nearer and nearer it came, like a pursued phantom, through the night, its one fiery eye lighting a path ahead.

On, on, and the locomotive was so near that it could not stop in time to save the life of the fair, innocent victim of a hellish plot, while Jake Corrigan held the neck in its place, across the rail.

On, on, and just as the fairly flying train came rushing up, a broad, long glare of lightning revealed to the horrified engineer the startling scene—but *too late!* The train could not be stopped until it had made the grade. Then a detachment of men were sent back, but all they found was, in one place, a headless body, and in another the head itself. The fiendish Bloodhounds had made good their escape.

CHAPTER II.

A "CLEANING OUT" AT "HEIFER SHEBANG."

IT was a raw, rainy day in Pompeii's gulch. The rain came down in perfect torrents, driving the miners from their respective claims, flooding the gulch with muddy, clayey water, tearing out sluice-boxes by the wholesale, and doing more or less damage everywhere.

The sky was overcast with cold, somber clouds that seemed to contain a mighty reservoir of water, and the wind was sharp and chapping.

Not a miner could stick to his labor in such unfavorable weather, and consequently the claims were all deserted, their owners having hied themselves to various saloons to seek spiritual "comfort" from Mose Snicker's black bottles.

Pompeii's gulch was a mining "strike" of no ordinary importance. Some ever-alert and active individual named Smith or Jones had discovered gold in the sandy bottom—gold in the granite and quartz rocks, and gold in the bed of Pompeii's creek, which, after miles of tortuous windings through a narrow, rocky gorge, debouched into the South Fork of the Platte river.

Immediately subsequent to Smith or Jones' discovery, the news spread like wild-fire to the Golden City diggings, and brought a swarm of "all sorts" back to the gulch of promise, which, we may as well add, fully acquitted itself, as regards the average miner's expectation.

The supply of the valuable metal was for a time quite inexhaustible, and it is in the happiest days of Pompeii's that we take the reader there to witness many strange and thrilling scenes.

Pompeii proper, consisted of a few rude huts along the slope, occupied by the few miners who had been rash enough to bring their families along with them; a store, a smithy, an overland-to-Denver express office, a drug store, and two saloons of great importance to the young metropolis—Mose Snicker's "Heifer Shebang," and Chauncey Tupper's "Spread-Eagle Ranch."

Both of these establishments boasted of a liberal patronage; both were favorite resorts to certain classes of the miners, and each had, in addition to the immense mirrors and sparkling luxuries behind the bar, a corps of very pretty San Francisco waiters-girls, to wait on and talk to the "plump" customers.

"Plump" men are known in the mines to be men whose word, no matter how bad as a general, can be backed in the shape of superfluous dust and greenbacks, to almost any amount.

On the day of which we write, a gang of roughs from over on the border, had come into Pompeii, with the avowed purpose of having a "tear an' cleanin' out the town."

A more repulsive or ruffianly-looking set had never been seen congregated together in one mining settlement, within the recollection of the oldest "cradler," and consequently, the excitement among the sparse population of Pompeii was something more than usual.

The gang were headed by a big burly borderman—a very giant in size, with a great breadth and depth of chest, large iron-like limbs, with wonderfully large-developed muscles; and a face as hideously furrowed, grisly, and repulsive as can well be imagined. His garments were coarse homespun, the trousers being thrust into an immense pair of knee-boots, and the shirt open at the hairy throat.

Taken altogether Big Hank La Verge, as he introduced himself, was as large and fine a specimen of the blatting bully as one could easily find, in a month of western travel. His associates were all of his type—rough, low-browed and grisly-looking wretches, whose natures cropped out very plainly in their rum-blossomed faces and bloodshot eyes.

All were armed to the teeth, and did not make an inviting assemblage, as they dismounted before the door of the "Heifer Shebang," and filed into the long crowded barroom.

This apartment was about a hundred feet long by fifty wide, and at the time of the arrival of Big Hank and his party, was half filled with the miners whom the pouring, ceaseless rain had driven to shelter.

"Heer we be!" shouted the giant bully, as the door slammed shut behind the last of his men—"heer we be, I tell ye—ther boss b'yees right up from Kansass, b'ilin' an' sp'ilin' fer a knock-

down an' a clean-out, an' ther struttin' cocks o' ther Topecky hen-roost!"

Most of the miners exchanged glances in which were both doubt and dread, and the eyes of the giant at once perceived the fact.

"Ye needn't git skeerd, yit!" he cried, with a coarse laugh, "fer we won't hurt ye, till we git squared up on our dander. We're gentlemen, right up frum the howlin' and yowlin' precincts o' Kansass, ar' we, an' we're goin' to hev a bu'st or bu'st the town. Them's ther fashun o' high-fingers we ar'; so perpare yerselves ter guv us a good fa'r shake, and we'll show ye ther shape they grow gentlemen down in Kansass.

"Who sez he's liberal enuff to set up ther bug-juice fer ther crowd?"

A dead silence ensued after this little speech, during which the big bully glared about, inquiringly. The miners sat quietly in the positions they had occupied upon the entrance of the gang, not one of them, apparently, caring to part with enough of their earnings to satisfy the thirsty appetites of the intruders.

A scowl of displeasure overspread the bully's face as no one answered.

"Whar's ther chicken-hearted rooster that sez digest liquid speerits!" he again roared, laying a dirty paw upon one of several six-shooters that graced his belt. "Let that graceless skunk make his presence manifest at the bar, ef he wishes to irrigate acres o' desert waists, wi' ther essence o' cornjuice, afore we git r'iled!"

This was intended as a threat, but it failed to effect the production of the desired beverage.

"Reckon ef ye want bug-juice ye'll hev ter fork over Kansas security," laughed one miner, bolder than the rest. "We ain't on ther set up just now; no, I'll be cussed ef we ar'!"

"What?" yelled Big Hank, taking a step forward, and cocking a revolver—"you'll be c'ust ef ye set up pizen ter us high-spurred fightin' cocks o' Topecky? Ye won't kick out no hospitality ter us legitimately-born gentlemen frum yowlin' Kansass?"

"No!" shouted the miners in a voice, as, of one accord, they gripped their weapons, and confronted the bully; "ef ye want whisky, why, pay fer it!"

"An' that's precisely w'at I'm goin' to do, ef I bu'st ther bank. Walk up ter ther pulpit, feller-cityzens, and hist bug-juice. Hayr's wot kim's frum Kansass, an' ain't no stingy sneak, like ther gold-grubbers o' Pompeii, neither. Step up, I say, b'yees, an' wet yer whistles!"

All of the giant's crowd obeyed the summons with alacrity, but the miners reseated themselves at their tables, to resume such games as had been interrupted on the gang's entrance.

"Cum up, I tell you, ye durned dirty skum o' creation!" shouted Big Hank, turning away from the bar, after having tossed off a brimming glass of raw whisky—"cum up an' h'ist eye-water, or, by the brass buttons on my grandfather's split-tail coat, my b'yees shell clean ye out! D'ye heer?"

"We hear, but don't heed!" retorted a handsome young miner, who, up to this moment, had been lounging in the rear end of the saloon. "See here, you big bummer, we want you to understand that we crave no liquor bought with your money, nor will we drink with you!"

"Ye won't, hey?"

"No, we won't. When we are thirsty, we've got money to buy whisky with!"

"Haw! haw!" roared the bully; "jes' heer the young baboon yelp, will ye? Talks like a goslin arter comin' out o' ther shell. "Ye'd think he war G'orge Washington or Comydoar Killpatrick, or some uther big frog, ter heer him yawp. Inste'd o' that he's nuthing but a leetle banty rooster, jes' cuttin' his fust spurs."

"You lie, you lubberly bloat!"

The words rung through the room, fiercely, sternly, and then there was a silence so deep that you could have heard a pin drop.

All eyes were turned upon the giant bully, for it was known among his comrades, and also, by hearsay, among the miners, that Big Hank La Verge never took the lie from anybody.

John Cameron, the young miner, had risen to his feet, and with his hands each clasped about the butt of a revolver, he was coolly awaiting the result of his words. The effect of them on the giant was wonderful to see, in a man of this type and disposition.

A wild, terrible glare of undying hatred swept over his repulsive visage, and he trembled from head to foot; but yet he uttered no word or threat—only stood like a statue, and glowered savagely down at the man who had dared to openly insult and face him.

For several moments the silence continued; then John Cameron broke it:

"You are a liar and a big overgrown idiot!" he said, with the utmost coolness. "Do you want any more?"

The bully gave vent to a horrible oath. "Ye shell fight!" he roared, unloosening his belt, and rolling up his sleeves, "and I'll crunch the life out of ye."

"Good. If you can whip me, you are the first man that ever did it!"

"A fight! a fight!" shouted the crowd, and while a ring was being formed, the men stripped for the contest.

Suddenly a new person rushed in upon the

scene, in the shape of one of the pretty waiter-girls, and threw her arms about John Cameron's neck.

"Oh! don't! don't, John!" she cried, tears filling her eyes—"don't fight that great monster. He will kill you!"

"Fear not, Kitty!" replied the young man, as he kissed her on the brow, and then endeavored to put her off. "I must fight this fellow and take some of the bully out of him. There! there, sis, never mind, and don't cry. I promise you I'll lick him, and come out best, too!"

But the young girl clung to him persistently, with sobs and screams, and refused to be put off.

"Ho! ho!" yelled Big Hank, suddenly catching a glimpse of the pretty face and trim figure of the maiden, "w'at in thunder's this? A gal, eh? and by ther bullrushes o' Moses, she's a stunner!"

"Yas, that's Hunky John's gal!" said one of the ruffians, in an undertone.

"Ef I war' you, cap'in, I'd have a kiss out o' her, afore his face."

"An' so I will!" chuckled the giant, and two great leaps brought him across the room to where Kitty was clinging desperately to her half-stripped lover.

But just as the vile wretch would have laid his brawny hand upon her, he received a stunning blow on the side of the head from the fist of a watchful miner, that spun him around like a top.

This was as good as a given signal for a free fight, or, at least, it was taken in that light; for both the border-ruffians and the miners sprung eagerly forward, weapons in hand.

The next instant the bar-room rung with the crack of the pistol, the clash of steel, and the yells of one and shrieks of another; chairs, benches, stools, bottles, jugs, and everything else that could be grabbed, was sent whizzing through the air; the great mirrors at the back of the bar were smashed into a thousand fragments, and bottles of highly prized "bug-juice" were knocked literally into the middle of next week.

One by one the miners were driven back over their own dead, but still they fought desperately, John Cameron and Kitty among the foremost in the affray. But the odds against them was too great, and when the brave young miner, Cameron, was seen to fall to the blood-stained floor, with the life-blood spurting from a hole in his breast, the remaining men fled from the saloon, through a back door.

CHAPTER III.

BIG HANK TACKLES THE WRONG CROWD—WILDCAT BOB, THE BOSS BRUISER FROM DENVER.

THE "Heifer Shebang" was undeniably cleaned out. The defeated miners fled pell-mell across the gulch to Tupper's "Spread Eagle," where they hurriedly related how roughly they had been used by the men from Kansas. Out of full three-score only two of the three remained to tell the tale.

The rest were either killed or wounded. "They hadn't better venture over in this direction!" pompously asserted ex-Confederate Col. Chauncey Tupper, as he strode fiercely up and down his bar-room, a six-shooter in either hand, "or thar'll be war, gentlemen—bloody war. Ef we ain't enough to knock spots out o' such a passel o' Kansas roughs like them, why, we order be rode on a fence-rail frum heer to perdition. Ain't it so, now, my jolly bummer?"

A thundering cheer from the crowd, now swelled to a hundred grisly, dirty miners, answered.

"Good!" yelled Colonel Tupper, delightedly; "ye look at the matter in the true shinnin' light, my ten-pins. Cum up an' h'ist bug-juice, you blessed cherubims, an' I'll stan' all ye kin swaller."

"Hey, Jim, you lubberly bartender, fetch out ther best eye-water for the crowd, an' let 'em irrigate freely, fer thar's another revolution a-comin', an' we must be prepared to meet steel wi' steel!"

In the meantime, affairs at the "Heifer Shebang" were progressing swimmingly, and Big Hank was master of the whole situation.

After the miners' flight, no one was left to offer opposition except Moses Snicker and a few of his waiter-girls, who had taken refuge behind the bar.

"Wah-hoo! wah-hoo!" roared the giant, flourishing himself about in a break-down upon the reeking floor; "three cheers fer ther legitimately-born gentlemen from Kansass—ther dubble-spurred fightin' cocks o' ther Topecky hen-roost. Walk up, my salubrious hard-knockers, an' help yerselves to w'at ye like. We're ther high-cockolorums of this ranch, are we, and in fer a thunderin' spree!"

Then the rabble made a rush for the bar, and a general fight ensued before the whisky and gin were equally divided, during which several of the gang received their death-wounds. At last, however, each man got his share, and, seating themselves alternately on top of the bar, tables, and so forth, the ruffians began to drink, sing, shout, and carouse to their hearts' content. All this time, in another part of the bar-room, another scene was being enacted.

Over the body of John Cameron knelt the waiter-girl, Kitty, sobbing in a manner piteous to behold.

"Never mind, dear," said the young man, huskily, as he endeavored to raise himself on his elbow, "never mind me. I am past all hope now, and it's no use of crying over me. You will soon forget me, Kitty, and find some one else to love, who is more worthy of you!"

"No, no!" sobbed the girl, passionately. "I never will, John. You are all in all to me, and I can never love another. But, oh! John, I almost forgot. Tell me who I am before you go. Oh! please do."

"It is a long story, dearest!" was the weary reply, "and I cannot hold out much longer. Still, I will give you a means of finding out your parentage, if you will promise me one thing."

"I promise—quick! tell me."

"You must promise me this: soon there will come to Pompeii's gulch a man who is a mortal enemy of mine. His name is Wildcat Bob, and he is a great fighting character, both with fists and deadly weapons. I know of no man who can stand before him in fair pugilistic play, nor one who can draw a truer bead with revolver. But, for all this, he is my enemy, and I want you to promise me that you will do all in your power to harm him—to kill him!"

"I promise," faltered the girl, shuddering.

"You must do more; you must swear it before high heaven."

"Well, then, I—I swear it!"

"As you hope to reach heaven?"

"As I hope to reach heaven!"

"Thank you," gasped the young miner, sinking back, and shivering. "That's over, thank God!"

"But my name, who am I?" almost shrieked the frenzied girl. "You shall not die till you tell me. Who am I?"

"Listen, then, if you would know. You are now known as Kitty Aymer, but that is not your true name."

"No, no, that is not my true name."

"Follow the gulch," continued the dying miner, "until you find a pine-tree that has been shattered by lightning. Dig down on the west side of it, till you find a box. In that box are papers that will—"

Here he suddenly ceased to speak, for a torrent of thick blood flowed from his mouth, and choked further utterance. And thus ended his words, for when the terrible bleeding had subsided, John Cameron's spirit had taken its flight.

Kitty Aymer, then, with the assistance of one of the other girls, succeeded in dragging him into another room of the "Shebang," where he was left until the overturned establishment could be righted.

By the middle of the afternoon the "gentlemen from Kansas" had finished the last of Snicker's liquor, and were fairly stimulated up into a "fightin' condition," to use their own words for it. It was then proposed that a visit be paid the "Spread-Eagle" saloon across the gulch—a proposition that was vociferously agreed to by the greater share of the roughs.

Accordingly they looked well to their arms, and filed out of the "Shebang," which was much the worse for the affray and carouse that had occurred within its walls.

It was but a step across the gulch to the western slope, and the gang, headed by Big Hank, were soon clamoring for admittance into the saloon of the valiant Colonel Chauncey Tupper.

"Ye can't cum in heer!" shouted that worthy individual from inside his barred doors. "Ye're a different kind o' a gang than we keep, an' so ye may's well clear out, the hull passel o' ye."

"You to —!" roared the giant bully, hoarsely, "d'ye take us fer a lot o' suckin' lambs, you old buzzard? Let us in an' set up the bug-juice, or we'll bu'st down yer shanty in less time than et takes a skeeter to chaw b'ar-meat."

"Bu'st, if ye think yer kin!" retorted the colonel through a crack in the door; "I hain't got no objections, only I warn ye it'll be the hottest bu'st ye ever expeeryenced. We're ready for ye, fist, slitter, an' barker, an' thar's a good hundred o' us; so kim along, ef ye feel that way!"

"Let us in, then!"

"Can't see ther p'int, 'thout ye're puticlar fond o' 'green' tew my terms."

"W'at ar' them, ye old rooster?"

"Deliver up all yer weepens."

"You to the devil! W'at kind o' ducks d'ye take us fer? We're legitimately born gentlemen frum Kansass—highfalutin', roarin', double-spurred cocks o' the Topecky hen-roost. Our word's as good as the psalm-book or dixunary!"

"Don't doubt it, sir; but et ain't good in Pompeii. Ef ye want to come in and liquor, why throw all yer weepens on terra-firma, an' I'll open up."

The gang now held a short consultation among themselves, and it was evidently concluded that peace would be best at present, for they all unbuckled their belts and cast them upon the ground.

Accordingly, the colonel flung open the doors, and the ruffians filed in. But they were regarded with fierce glances of hatred by the miners, all of whom were massed in the rear end of the

bar-room, talking excitedly, though in an undertone.

"Cum up, feller-citizens!" yelled Big Hank, executing a clumsy handspring, and capering about; "roll up, an' liquidate at the expense of Big Hank La Verge, the Hard-knocker o' To-peeky. 'Range yerself's long ther bar, heer, ye jabberin' sons-o'-guns, an' shed eye-water tew ther debt o' me, the high-cockolorum o' yowlin' Kansass. Don't be bashful, my feller-brethern, nor timid. Hayr's w'at's equal ter all emargencies, an' he's ten thousan' dollars salted down in the St. Louie bank. Tumble up, I tell ye, afore I git'riled, an' h'ist bug-juice an' alkyhawl, an' I'm a darned ring-tailed rhinossersoser ef I hain't got ther chips tew liquidate wi'. Wah-hoo! thar, cuss it, ain't ye goin' ter whisky wi' me, ye pizen imps?"

"We ain't thirsty, now," said one of the miners, for the crowd. "When we are, we'll let ye kno', providin' we ain't got no dudads to b'y beverage with."

"All right, my saintly cherubims; ef ye ain't dry, why I ar', an' heer's ter yer health an' yer suckness;" and seizing a bottle that had just been placed on the bar, he clapped the nozzle to his mouth, and emptied the fiery contents, in a couple of ravenous gulps, into his stomach. "Thar!" he roared, smacking his lips with great gusto, as he hurled the empty bottle at the head of one of the waiter-girls; "that's w'at I call invigoratin', an' bennyfishel ter one's consumptive system. Now, I'm a man—a squar', fa'r sort of an interlectual man. What! my dear girly, did that darned bottle hit ye? Excuse me, excuse me, my beloved critter! I didn't no more intend to bu'st ye over ther probossey, nor did G'orge Wash-tingen inten' tew cut down his father's sap-bush wi' his leetle hatchit. B'leeve me, fairest o' petticoats, it war quite an axydent—simply a freak of my exceedingly playful nature. I am subject tew sech streaks, like, when I'm jes' 's innocent an' harmless as a two-year-old goslin'. One can fondle an' pet me jes' 's ye do wi' the frisky little lamb, an' I make not the faintest wee bit o' resistance. Sumtimes my dispersion ar' meek an' fawn-like; then, ag'in, et ar' like that uv a young yearling bull in high clover grass. I feel like's if I'd jist like to bu'st sumthin'—scatter, punch, an' demolish a hull regiment o' sumbody. Why, sirs, my knuckles fairly itch fer solid bizness. My muscles an' jints ache wi' suspended anymashun. In sich moments as these, I *must* have physical exercise. When I can't git nothin' else to punch, I've been known to actually attack the hull side uv a barn, so eager war I fer bodily exercise. Gentlemen, an' feller juice-h'isters, I'm feelin' in one o' them playful spells jist about now. I'm all on nettles to box the ears off o' some one. Sech bein' the case, I hev' got jest ten gold nuggets layin' hayr on ther counter, tew say I kin break the neck o' any cuss as will squar' off ag'in' me!"

None of the miners seemed anxious to measure strength with a man so vastly their superior both in body and muscular size and development.

"What!" chuckled the bully, as he saw that no one offered to molest him, "ain't none o' ye goin' ter win ten golden shiners, an' ten ad-dishenal golden opinyuns, jes' 's easy's skimmin' cock-roaches out o' Lousyanner 'lasses? For shame, ye lazy, cowardly sneaks—*afraid* to tackle such a playful little fawn as me! I'm actually 'shamed o' ye!"

Still none of the miners offered to accept the challenge.

"I jedge when I want ter tackle a hull moun-t'in, I'll go to Pike's Peak," grunted one old veteran, who was the largest man in his crowd. "I ain't purtlicker fond o' foolishin' around sich elephants as ye, myself!"

This caused a general titter through the bar-room, and the giant, in consequence of his copious draught of "pizen," laughed with the rest.

"Haw! haw!" he roared; "poultice me wi' onions an' skunks' grease, ef I ever sot peepers on sich a cowardly set o' slinkies. Why, feller-jaw-waggers, w'ot in *thunder* ar' ye afraid of? Thar's nothin' about the high-cockolorum o' Kansass to be skeered at—nothin' at all. I'm jest one o' the docilest, meekest, and playfulest little goslin's as ye ever heered tell on. I would not hurt you fer a swaller o' eye-water; oh, no! That'd be ag'in' my gentlemanly principles. All I want and crave, is simply a little playful elbow exercise. Once more, an' fer ther last time, I'll bet ten dollars I can knock stars out o' any sinner within gunshot!"

"As I'm open for engagements, old man, I bet ten dollars you can't!"

Every man started and gazed around in astonishment, as these words rung through the great apartment, uttered by a voice both cool and cheery. A man had just dismounted at the open door of the "Spread Eagle," from the back of a richly caparisoned and splendid-looking horse, and had overheard the bully's challenge.

And such a man!

Admiration was in the eye of every spectator as they gazed at him.

He was apparently about five-and-twenty years of age, though he might easily have been supposed younger from the freshness and

healthy glow of a face peculiarly handsome in all its various lineaments. In stature he stood five-feet-eight in his top-boots—a man whose every proportion was splendidly developed, as only a life of constant and vigorous exercise could develop. His limbs were small, clean and hard as iron, the muscles standing out in striking prominence at the least move.

His face, as before said, was peculiarly handsome, the features being perfectly regular, and classic, with a pleasant mouth, expressive in its curving of a jovial good-nature, eyes black and penetrating, and hair of the hue of the raven's wing. His face was smoothly shaven, and in the absence of beard he looked a trifle boyish. This, however, need not make him so, and those who have ever taken a friendly bout or tussle with Wildcat Bob, can bear witness to my assertion that he was the hardest striker and the quickest wrestler of his day. "Every dog has his day," is the old saying, and Robert had his during the exciting days which made Denver and its surrounding famous in the annals of gold-mining. He was clad in a loosely-fitting suit of gray clothing, and a jaunty straw hat was pushed back on his head. No belt encircled his waist, nor was he, to all outward appearances, armed.

There he stood, in the doorway of the "Spread Eagle" saloon, his arms folded across a broad chest, the very impersonation of a glorious manhood, after having delivered himself of the words:

"As I'm open for engagements, old man, I bet ten dollars you can't!"

A murmur of applause ran through the assembly, and the roughs parted to either side to allow him a path into the saloon. Without the least hesitation he stepped forward into the bar-room, and confronted the "gentleman from Kansass."

"Ha!" growled the bully, eying the muscular bulges in our hero's arms, a little suspiciously, "so ye're my meat, ar' ye, younker? Ye're ther huckleberry that wants ter play *cuffee* wi' this playful kitten, ar' ye? W'at mought yer name be?"

"My name, old gent, is one I think you have heard before—Wildcat Bob, at your service—the boss bruiser from Denver. What is your handle?"

An exclamation of surprise and wonder came from either hand, and Big Hank, even, stepped back a pace and eyed his man closer.

"Ye Wildcat Bob? Ye the rooster what knocked the eye out o' Rowdy Ralph up in Denver?" he growled, savagely.

"I'm that presumptuous rooster, yes!"

"Then by ther split-tail coat of my great grandsire, I'm glad tew see you. You're the percise individual I've been lookin' for these twelve months. So ye want bet me ten dollars I ken't knock your skull off, do you?"

"Yes, I'm the man, and I'm ready to bet you twenty of 'em, or thirty, or forty, that you can't!" was the cool reply, as the boss bruiser from Denver stared the giant squarely in the face.

"Wah-hoo! wah-hoo!" roared the bully, capering about delightedly, "jes' heer thet, will ye? We're goin' tew have a playful game o' pussy's got a corner—a real lively bit of exercise. Form a ring, feller juice-h'isters—form a ring, an' watch how ther high cockolorum o' Kansass manyfacters tumble-jelly out o' ther braggin' bruiser from Denver. Whoop! whoop! I feel like er bran-newly hatched goslin', I do, an' hayr's one hundred gold shiners that sez I'm ther winner o' ther race in ten round heats. I say, ye young purp, how menny rounds shell et be, afore we quit?"

"I'll leave that for you to say, old man!" replied the pugilist, a faint smile hovering about his lips. "I think, however, that about two heats will be sufficient for my purpose!"

"Haw! haw!" roared Big Hank, sneeringly; "d'ye hear thet, now? The young struttin' cock is skeered already!"

"You lie!" retorted Wildcat Bob, fiercely, and slapping an eagle-piece down on the bar, he jerked off his hat and shirt with alacrity.

The giant did likewise, and in less time than it takes to tell it, a ring was formed, the contestants stepped inside, and confronted each other.

Both were naked to the waist, and though Big Hank was vastly the Wildcat's superior in breadth, depth, and hight, the latter's muscles and arms were if anything respectively harder, and longer, which balanced the odds of the bully's size. After glaring steadily at each other for a few seconds, the two men stepped forward, and Big Hank began the contest by making a furious lunge at his opponent. The blow was received on the left arm of the bruiser, and the next moment he returned a terrible blow right out from his shoulder, hitting the giant fair in the left eye.

Down he went to the floor all in a promiscuous heap, while he howled with pain and rage.

"Once!" yelled Chauncey Tupper from behind the bar. "Hev ye got yer stomach full, ye overgrown weed from Kansass?"

Not a word said the giant, but on being assisted to his feet by one of his pals, he again squared off. As before he put in the first blow,

and a "stinger" it was, taking effect on the left cheek of his antagonist. With a cry, more like some furious animal than human, he reeled back a pace; then bringing up his knotty right arm quickly, he planted a second blow in on the bully's left eye.

This time the effect was instantaneous. Big Hank dropped like a log to the floor.

"Time!" shouted one of his pards, and a bucket of water was dashed into his swelling face. In a short time he recovered, and managed to stand upright on his feet.

"Enough?" queried the colonel, in delight.

"No!" howled the ruffian, and he leaped madly, blindly forward. But again the unerring arm of Wildcat Bob met him, and a blow in the same place as the other two stretched him for the third time upon the floor.

And as he lay there apparently lifeless, the bruised left eye popped from its socket, and lay exposed and quivering on his discolored cheek!

CHAPTER IV.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

ABOUT six miles northeast of Pompeii was a little settlement, at the time of our story, which we shall take the liberty to christen Harper's.

It consisted of a score or more of rude shanties, a village store and one hotel, and the inhabitants were for a large part a mingling of squatters and emigrants, though one would occasionally meet a male or female in the streets who were of the better class, and whose dress declared them to be persons of some refinement and wealth.

Harper's was a dull, drowsy little place, with nothing going on of much excitement—nothing doing except the little cultivation that was given the broad surrounding acres of unproductive land. Most of the town's working-people managed to eke out a miserable living, and this was the hight of their aspirations. Some of the men farmed it, some hunted, fished and trapped, and others "laid for the highway," at every suitable opportunity. The gold-fever affected Harper's only in the most trifling degree, and thus they lived and lazed away the days as they came and went.

On a slight eminence half a mile from the village were two large, modern-built, and imposing residences, not two hundred yards apart, and inclosed by ornamental fences of iron.

Well-kept yards, adorned by thrifty young trees and beautiful beds of blooming flowers, fronted each dwelling, and everything in outward appearance was similar, for what improvement was noticeable in one place might be seen counterparted in its neighbor.

These residences had been built by a wealthy land-agent, Charles Seton by name, for the accommodation of himself and family, and the family of another gentleman who proposed making the West his home. But the latter changing his mind shortly after the buildings were completed, one of them had been sold to a speculator named Bloodgood.

With these two families we shall have to deal, so a brief description of them will not be wholly amiss.

Of the Setons there were three—father, mother, and a very attractive daughter of eighteen, named Amber.

Both of the elder Setons were past middle age, well-to-do as far as the world's riches went, and very happy in the love of their amiable offspring.

Amber was charming of face and form, with a sweet sunny disposition and impulsive nature, and was beloved by all who knew her. She had no society except at home, but this did not deter her from enjoying herself, for on the back of her gentle pony she took many a wild, gay ride over the boundless prairie; chased the buffalo, and shot the swift-limbed deer, and had a joyous time altogether.

Charles Seton was a grave, stern-faced man of fifty, with a cold, uninviting bearing, that precluded an advance of friendship from those with whom he came in contact, and an arrogance to his inferiors that made him more enemies than friends.

His hair and beard were streaked with silvery gray, and his eyes always wore a hunted expression, as if he was ever expecting some accusing phantom to rise and confront him, or, fearing a blow in a moment when he might be off his guard.

Mrs. Seton was a gay, vivacious little body, of five years her husband's junior, and she it was to whom pretty fair-faced Amber owed her sunny temper.

The Setons lived in a quietly elegant style, and no one outside of their immediate household would have ever suspected that there was a skeleton in their family closet. Yet there was—in Charles Seton's own individual closet—one that in its terrible rattles jarred in secret on his high-strung nerves.

The Bloodgoods consisted of four persons—Major Anderson Bloodgood, his invalid wife, one son named Thorpe—a young scapgrace of two-and-twenty, and a girl of about Amber Seton's size and age. Her name was Bertha, and she was if anything prettier than Amber, though she was a dark brunette, while Amber was a decided blonde.

The two families did not associate nor even speak together, for the Setons, at the command of their stern progenitor, advanced not the slightest degree of hospitality or sociability; consequently as neighbors they remained strangers to each other.

Bertha Bloodgood took a gallop over the prairies every morning, sometimes alone, but more often accompanied by gay frolicsome Thorpe, and Amber Seton did the same, but somehow the girls rarely chanced to meet, as their course, as if by concerted arrangement, was in different directions.

Charles Seton was absent from his home much of the time, attending to his duties. He held vast tracts of land in certain sections of the West, which, owing to the incessant tide of immigration, he did not have serious trouble in disposing of.

Major Bloodgood was here, there, and everywhere. Where there was a chance for profitable speculation he went, and he never came out of an investment with less in his pocket than there was in it previous to said investment. He was wide-awake, calculating and shrewd, and ever on the alert for a "fat" opportunity, his operations being chiefly confined to the mining districts and lumber regions of the North. On the night of that eventful rainy day that we have described in Pompeii, Charles Seton returned to his home in a state of angry nervousness.

He had ridden all the way to Denver with a view to disposing of a worn-out claim in Pompeii's gulch, to a party of greenhorns from the East, only to find that they had purchased in the Golden City mines. So he had nothing to do but ride back through the drenching rain, and put up with the disappointment as best he could.

This played-out claim was about sixteen miles down the rugged gulch from Harper's, or ten miles from the thriving "city" of Pompeii, and was in as lone and desolate a section as there was in Colorado.

Some enterprising miners had run a shaft here, with the idea that gold was to be found hundreds of feet below the surface, but theirs had been a rash venture. Ere they had gone down a hundred feet, the top caved in on and killed them. Shortly afterward another party recommenced the tunneling, dug out the bodies of the ill-fated miners, and ran the shaft down to a depth of two hundred feet, when both their stock of money and patience played out, and the claim was abandoned.

Since then it had been reported haunted, and it was rarely visited, although Charles Seton had never quite despaired of selling it to his pecuniary advantage. But, to-night, he inwardly swore that he would not again make an effort for its disposal.

"You can send me up a cup of coffee to my room, Maria," he said as he entered the kitchen, and threw aside his oilcloth cloak. "I'm tired, and soaked to the skin, too. Curse that bothersome claim, I'll never raise a hand to sell it, again. It's given me more than a thousand dollars' worth of trouble already."

"I told you I didn't believe those fellows would buy it!" said Mrs. Seton, as she gave the hickory fire another stir. "There are better claims awaiting industrious miners than that, my dear."

"Bah! that's good enough!" he growled, pulling off his boots and throwing them into a distant corner "if one could find any sensible men to take the thing in hand. Where's Amber?"

"She ran down to the village for some tea, a few moments ago."

"What! in all this storm?"

"She had an umbrella," faltered the wife.

"I don't care if she did. She'll catch her death of cold, now, mark my words. If she does, I'll break your head for it!"

"Very well," replied Mrs. Seton, composedly, as her irritable spouse limped from the room. She was used to this, and knew how to take him, when angry.

Mr. Seton went to his bedchamber, and sought a somewhat lengthy solace from a flask, that stood conspicuously on his dressing-stand. He then descended the stairs to his library, a handsomely appointed room, in which burned a cheery fire.

"Ugh!" he grunted, as he seated himself before the inviting blaze to warm his damp feet, "this is horrible weather—outrageous weather. If it keeps on this way long, it will give me the rheumatism again. Blast the weather, anyhow. Maria! I say, Maria!"

"Well, what is it?" demanded Mrs. Seton, thrusting her head in at the door.

"Oh! nothing much. How have things gone, since I left this morning?"

"So you've got over your huff, eh?" she retorted.

"Shut up!" he snapped, reaching quickly toward the floor, "or I'll sling this spittoon at your head, you old virago!"

"Jest do!" she laughed, catching up a pair of tongs, "and see how I'll doctor you of your gruffness, you old boor."

"But you have not answered me. Has any one been here to see me during the day? I didn't know but old Roerson, of Denver, might have dropped down to see me concerning that tract of land south of Omaha."

"No, there has been no one here."

"Anything new about the folks in the other house?"

"Where?—at Bloodgoods?"

"Yes."

"Yes, there is something new there, dear," said Mrs. Seton, entering the room and seating herself with a mysterious nod. "I tell you, Charles, we've got to keep an eye on our child."

"Certainly, Maria, certainly. But, what do you have reference to?"

"To our Amber and Thorpe Bloodgood, dear."

"To our Amber and Thorpe Bloodgood," repeated the land-agent, with a little start.

"Why, what of them?"

"This!" whispered Mrs. Seton, impressively.

"While we have been little dreaming of it, they have been carrying on a secret correspondence, and meeting on the sly. Look at this!"

She took an envelope from her pocket, and gave it to him. It was directed simply to

"Miss Amber Seton."

The superscription was in a bold and well-trained hand.

"How came you by this?" demanded the land-agent, giving vent to a low curse, as he took a sheet of paper from the wrapper, and glanced over the contents.

"I saw young Bloodgood sneak into our yard and slip the letter into a bed of flowers," replied Mrs. Seton, "so I was not slow in getting possession of it. But, just read it, my dear. Why 'tis the most outrageous piece of business I ever heard of."

Charles Seton's brow grew rough with rage as he went carefully over the lines. It ran as follows:

"MY DEAR MISS SETON—I received your note, and will meet you at our old trysting-place, to-morrow, if I can possibly get away from my sister. Until then, I remain

"Lovingly yours, THORPE BLOODGOOD."

The land-agent cast the missive from him, and springing to his feet, paced angrily up and down the room.

"Curses on them both!" he cried, biting his lip fiercely. "Have I not told the brat repeatedly not to dare to even look at those people? Now, this is a fine state of affairs—a fine state, indeed. And it's all your fault, Maria, all your fault. Had you kept the girl in, as I ordered, nothing like this would ever have happened. Now, something has got to be done!"

"My dear," said Mrs. Seton, soothingly, "do not take on so. For my part, I see no actual harm in it. If the Bloodgoods are really a good family—and we have no reason to think different—I do not see why it could fail to be a good match. This Thorpe seems to be an attractive young fellow, and I am sure his father is well-to-do."

"Madam!" interrupted the land-agent, almost livid with passion—"will you hush, I say? Let me hear no more of this. Thorpe Bloodgood marry my daughter? No, by all the gods, I'll see him—you—her—all in the fiery pit first. Why, woman, have I not told you, time and again, that no intimacy must spring up between us and them—that they are my enemies, and should I be recognized by them, all would be lost? Curses on them—curses on you and your brat! Leave the room, madam—leave the room, I say, and let me think. What shall I do? I know of but one thing. I'll walk over to this rascal's house and put a bullet through him. Hold! madam; tell me, did the young villain see you get this letter?"

"I—I don't know!" faltered Mrs. Seton, pale and trembling, "but I think that he did watch me go to the place, though I was careful in taking up the note."

Charles Seton turned away with a horrible, sarcastic laugh.

"You are an idiot!" he hissed—"a blind, crazy fool. You have ruined me; I know it, I know it. But go! leave me alone, and when that brat comes, if she ever does, send her to me at once. Do you hear—send her to me at once."

"You will not harm her, Charles—"

"Oh! no. I won't harm her, not I!" he replied, with a wild maddened laugh; then he pointed sternly toward the kitchen. She bowed, and leaving the room, closed the door behind her.

"Now, I am alone!" he hissed, striding up and down the room like a tiger in its cage—"alone, and I can think. What shall I do? Shall I tell them both and thus end the matter? Yes, that seems the only resort. But ha! I didn't think of that, before. Already they may have flown! Yes! yes! that is what they have done, curse them. But they shall not escape—oh! no. I will follow them even to the ends of the earth!"

He seized his hat and leaped toward a glass door which opened out onto a front porch. But the next instant he recoiled, while a yell of horror pealed from his lips.

A face and two hands were pressed closely against the frame of glass; a face so hideous and distorted that it might have been taken for a grotesque mask. A face of a corpse in color, with terrible furrows and wrinkles; and a mouth wide open, exposing two repulsive ivory fangs; eyes that burned in sunken sockets like

balls of fire; hair snarled and matted; and hands—such awful hands, more like the claws of some wild beast than those of a human being.

It was an awful, hideously-terrible spectacle, and yet there were traces of where beauty had been, long ago, in that same face.

Charles Seton staggered back, white as death, and then as there was a blood-curdling shriek from without, he could bear no more, but fainted quite away.

CHAPTER V.

THE MAN WHO BOUGHT THE HAUNTED CLAIM.

CRIES of astonishment and wonder came from every hand at the sight of the senseless bully and his eye, and a dozen of his pals sprung forward to assist him to his feet, but Wildcat Bob hurled them back with giant strength.

"Back!" he shouted, taking the matter quite coolly for all the impending danger, "back, or I'll spile more than one of you. Keep back, and let me tend to this big moose, or he'll never attempt another set-to, I can tell you."

With growls and mutterings of vengeance, the ruffian crowd slunk away, while the athlete knelt down beside Big Hank.

Colonel Tupper also came forward, rubbing his greasy hands, gleefully.

"By Moses, young feller!" he ejaculated, slapping the bruiser on the shoulder, "you're a brick—a double-action, compressed brick, an' no mistake. Why, I've seen prize-fightin', sir—lots of scientific prize-fightin', but I never see'd ther like o' ye, by no means. It was beautiful, sir, actually beautiful, and can't be beat. I'll back you wi' ten thousand ag'in' any bruiser in ther universe."

"I'd advise you to use your small change first, Cap.," was the sarcastic reply. "Then you would not be wholly swamped, should your estimation of my prowess betray you into difficulty. By the way, you may fetch me a little whisky, and I will try and repair this damaged individual."

"Cool—wonderfully cool!" muttered the colonel to himself, after ordering one of his rosy-cheeked waiter girls to fetch out the required spirits. "He'd be a fortune to some enterprising young man who could 'farm' him out, through the Eastern States, and no individual, with mental and financial capacity, is better adapted to such a venture than myself, to be sure. Exactly! 'tis a grand thought, an' I'm goin' ter tackle him on the subject, as soon as possible. Oh! ye visions of slowly-acquired wealth, avaunt! I've snatched another, an' a vast superior idee. I've found a sinecure, sure pop, an' ef I longer live in ignomoney an' pecuniary distress, ye ken 'skin me for a rabbit—yes, ye can take my hair wi' a Comanche scalp-in' knife!"

In the mean time the whisky had been produced, and after gently repressing the dislodged eye back into the socket, Wildcat Bob bathed the swollen and discolored cheek and brow for several moments. He then poured a quantity of the fiery stimulant down the giant's throat, after which he rose quietly to his feet and glanced about him. The expressions on the faces of the border ruffians were anything but friendly and inviting. They glared at him with a savage ferocity, that, despite his self-command and courage, made him shudder a trifle. He knew that a storm was brewing whose whole force was to be directed against him; yet he did not fear for his present personal safety.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a cool, unhesitating tone, "you have witnessed the contest, and the effect it has had on yon giant. Is there any one among you that wishes to step out here and measure strength with me,—any one who cares to stand up before me, and say I didn't give a fair shake to Big Hank, all through?"

For reply, there came a thundering "Three cheers for the Boss Bruiser!" from the miners, and a low angry murmur from the ruffians. At least there were as many for the Wildcat as there were against him. But no one seemed eager to accept his challenge, so he donned his garments, and casting a nod toward the colonel, moved toward the door where his horse was yet standing.

"Coward!" cried a voice from among the ruffian crowd, just loud enough for the word to reach the young man's ears. Then the same voice added:

"He wants ter sneak off afore Big Hank gets on his taps ag'in, fer feer he'll get busted in the mug!"

Quick as a flash Wildcat Bob wheeled, and his blazing eyes scanned the sea of threatening faces in search of the taunter.

"Show me the whelp that called me a coward!" cried the bruiser, sternly, laying one hand upon the bar, and watching the gang narrowly. "Bring him out where I can get a squint at the blustering loafer!"

But the offender evidently did not care to expose himself, for he did not come forth, and his pals were too loyal to discover him to their enemy. A contemptuous smile hovered about the athlete's mouth as he saw how matters stood.

"Seeing as you seem to doubt my courage, I'll wait for your big bully to recover, though I

shall not strike him again unless he continues the affair. I say, colonel, you haven't given me my prize money, yet?"

"Right!" ejaculated the colonel, making a dive into his individual pantaloons pockets—"right, my son, right. In the excitement of the moment I had quite forgot,—yes, ahem! quite forgot;" and he laid two ten-dollar notes on the counter; "there, is that correct?"

"Ten, twenty; yes, that makes it. Now, then, I wish yon bully would be quick about waking up, as I am in a hurry."

His wish was soon granted, for Big Hank presently gave a great gasp, and sat up on the floor. For some time he stared around, bewildered; then he seemed to have pain in his left optic, for he rubbed it with one brawny finger.

As he ceased, to his great horror and consternation, the eye rolled out again on his cheek, and hung there by a few slender fibers.

Without a word he picked it up between his thumb and forefinger, and gave a wry squint at it with his uninjured eye. With almost breathless interest the spectators watched.

For several moments he gazed at it rather mournfully, his great visage the scene of a variety of conflicting emotions; then, with a long-drawn sigh he attempted to replace it in its socket. But it would not stay there, and after a dozen endeavors it still persisted in popping from its socket and dropping out on his cheek. Plainly, the eye was a "goner," and he at last seemed to comprehend the fact, for he turned to a miner and motioned to the effect that he wanted a knife.

He soon procured one, and with a single sweep of the keen blade, he severed the dislodged orb from its fastenings, and laid it on the bar.

Then, with a wild, awful yell, that seemed to fairly raise the roof, and before any one had dreamed of his devilish intention, he wheeled around and leaped upon—his enemy, the Wildcat?

No! by a strange fatality, no!

All the time the Boss Bruiser had been leaning sideways against the bar, and it had been the cunning ruffian's plan to spring suddenly around, and taking him off guard, to plunge the knife into his heart. But something had caused Wildcat Bob to step out from the bar, and another man had immediately taken his place, who chanced to be one of Big Hank's own gang.

Consequently, when the ruffian whirled about and made a furious lunge with his knife, the blade entered not the heart of the intended victim, but, instead, the heart of a desperado of the giant's worst class. Without a groan the man tumbled to the floor—dead.

As he perceived what he had done, the ruffian started back, aghast, and gazed with his single eye at his work.

Then, with a curse, he flung the knife from him, picked up and donned his garments, and finally took the staring eye from the counter, and slipped it into his pocket.

"Come!" he said, with a sullen growl, to his men, and to the surprise of all, he stalked straight out of the saloon, followed by the gang.

Once outside, he turned and shook his fist toward the athlete, angrily.

"I'll see ye ag'in, my young banty-rooster!" he roared, coupling his speech with a torrent of furious oaths, "an' settle over this bizness, bet yer boots. Hank La Verge ain't the high-cock-olorum to cave in while thar's knuckles, pistols, an' powder in ther land. Keep yer eye skinned, I tell ye, fer ye'll heer frum me ag'in, afore long!"

And finishing up with another volley of curses, the wretch buckled on his weapons, which had been lying on the ground, and mounted his steed. His pals did likewise, and then the whole gang rode up out of the gulch toward the east.

The deserted claim, of which we have previously made mention, lay ten miles down Pompeii's gulch, and was locked in by mighty walls of rock and forests of heavy towering pines. The claim consisted simply of a shaft sunken down into the ground, over which was an apparatus of the well-curb order for hoisting and lowering a bucket-shaped car. This was all. Nothing else about the spot indicated that human feet had ever trodden the pebbly sands. No human habitation, no sign of life, nothing save the blank, slumberous forest, the rugged gray walls of rock, and the stream that coursed along the bottom. This, since leaving the mining settlement above, had enlarged somewhat by the addition of several rivulets, until it was quite a small river. Two miles below this claim stood a deserted saw-mill. Before the gold-fever had attacked Pompeii's gulch, this property had been erected for the lumber trade, and had done a good business; for it furnished Denver with much of its early building material.

But no sooner had the fever developed, than the sawyer and the wood-cutter alike deserted their toilsome vocation, and fled to the scene of the new excitement. Consequently, the mill was shut down; no longer did the great water-wheel splash around and around, nor the saw cleave the air with its rasping sound.

One man still lived in one of the several shanties that were gathered on the shore of the dark,

sluggish pond, and he was the owner of the mill. He had purchased the property at a sacrifice, and with his daughter, a winsome maiden of seventeen, was living away the quiet, retired days—waiting for that distant day to come, when the gold-fever should die out, and the mill could begin its prosperous career again.

This man, Bill Wood by name, was a middle-aged, grisly fellow, who loved his brier-wood pipe next to his lovely daughter, and was contented with life when he had ten dollars in his pocket, and plenty of provisions in his larder.

One thing—he never was heard to complain. On this same day that witnessed the scene at Col. Tupper's "Spread Eagle Ranch," Bill Wood was lounging on the mill-flume, when he heard a heavy footstep, and turning his head, he beheld a thin personage standing by his side.

He was a man of perhaps fifty, and very tall, and poor of flesh, with a bearded face, which told in its furrows and wrinkles that sorrow and trouble were not strangers to him. He was dressed in shabby garments, and evidently was not well-to-do in the world's possessions.

"Good afternoon," he said, bowing to the mill-owner; "I'm in search of Bill Wood; are you the man?"

"Waal, yes, I am Bill Wood. What do you want of me?"

"I will tell you. You have the right to sell and receive the cash for a certain tract of land—a gold claim it is—which is known as the 'Haunted Claim?'"

"Waal, yes; reckon I have. Boss Seton told me to dispose o' it, if I ever got a chance; but, then, you know, he never calkylated that I'd git a chance."

"Exactly. I suppose, then, there is not a very ready sale for the mine?"

"Guess not!" declared Bill, emphatically. "Folks, as a gener'l thing, don't hanker arter it, ye kno', c'ase what gold's thar wouldn't fill a tin dipper, an', 'sides, there's sed to be spooks about the place. I never see'd any, but thar's them as has!"

The stranger laughed, a low peculiar laugh, that made cold chills creep down the mill-owner's spine.

"I'm not afraid of spooks!" he said, stooping and picking up a chip and hurling it into the pond. "What is the price the owner has set upon the claim?"

"Waal, it's enough, I reckon," answered Wood, "an' a plaguey sight more'n I'd give fer it, bet yer boots. Mister Seton sed sell it if I could make it fetch five hundred dollars, an' ef I couldn't git thet much, to sell it fer w'atever I could git."

The stranger gave vent to another of his sepulchral laughs.

"That is fair, now, I'm sure," he admitted, amused at the old man's honest blunder.

"I'll tell you what I'll do. Are the bucket and curb in good condition?"

"First rate."

"Well, then, I'll give you a hundred gold dollars for the claim, just as it stands!"

Bill opened both his eyes and huge mouth in great amazement.

"You don't mean it?" he gasped.

"Certainly, I do," was the quiet response.

"Have you a receipt ready to fill out, sir, as I am in a hurry?"

"Yas; come over to the caboose, an' I'll fix it out, right off. Mister Seton left me a dockyment for thet purpose. But, stranger, ef ye won't thunk me impertinent, what in the devil d'ye want o' the Haunted Claim? 'Pears to me as if ye warn't in yer right mind, a-buyin' of a hole. Why, man alive, thar's never bin a smidger of gold found there, nor wi'in ten miles o' thar!"

"Maybe they didn't dig deep enough!" suggested the stranger, evasively. "It takes unceasing perseverance to accomplish wonders, you know. I shall dig down another hundred feet!"

"Jeewhittaker!" whistled the proprietor; but he didn't express his opinion of the eccentric purchaser aloud. "Guess I'll take a run up and see how you git along, once ye're fairly agoin'."

"No!" was the quick, stern response. "You need not put yourself to that trouble. I prefer to have no one near the claim when I am working."

"All right," grunted Bill, gruffly. "I'd jes's le've stay away as not, an' thar'll be so much shoe-leather saved."

They had now reached and entered the settler's humble shanty, and the visitor was motioned to a rude, wooden bench, while Wood went to rummaging through a pile of sooty documents in a chimney cupboard.

A young maiden was washing up a mess of pots and kettles on a table near the door, and the stranger eyed her narrowly, as he waited.

She was about seventeen, in rosy, blooming health, and wondrously pretty in face and form. Her complexion was fair, her eyes of a soulful blue, and her hair brown, softly fine, and very long, for it fell in a wavy, unconfined mass below a faultless waist.

Certainly, thought the keen-eyed observer, with her beauty of form and feature, and the neatness about her very common, coarse attire, she was the most attractive picture he had seen

in a long while—a flower budding into blossom in the wild, dismal wilderness.

Bill Wood soon succeeded in hunting up the requisite document, and the Haunted Claim was duly made over to the stranger in the name of Thomas Lamonte, and one hundred gold dollars were paid, according to the agreement.

The purchaser then bade the father and daughter a pleasant good-day, and shouldering the pick and shovel he had brought with him, he set off up the gulch, promising to call around "as soon as he made an independent fortune," as he laughingly remarked.

CHAPTER VI.

WILDCAT BOB'S ENGAGEMENT—THE "MEDICAL AGENT"—AT BAY.

AFTER Big Hank and his gang were out of sight over the summit of the slope, Wildcat Bob turned back toward the bar, behind which stood Colonel Tupper.

"That's a tough band," he said, with his low, cool laugh—a laugh that always came from the depths of a courageous and brave heart. "That big bully is a sight good for sore eyes!"

"And a sore eye he's got," returned the colonel, facetiously, "or rather, no eye."

"And he will drown the pain o' the lost eye, wi' plenty o' eye-water!" suggested a miner, facetiously.

"No doubt! no doubt!" decided the colonel.

"By the way, young man, can I have a word with you, in private?"

"With me?" asked the Boss Bruiser, somewhat surprised.

"Certainly! with you. Please step around behind the bar, into my little office, back here, and I will make the interview as brief as possible, sir."

Wildcat Bob obeyed the directions, after a moment's hesitation, and the proprietor of the "Spread Eagle" ushered him into an adjoining room. A small wing built out from the main structure was used as an office and retiring room by the colonel and his airy waiter-girls.

After pointing the athlete to a capacious office-chair, the colonel closed and locked the door, and seated himself close at hand.

"Young man," he began, impressively, while he stroked and restroked his luxuriant Burn-sides, "I have requested this interview fer our muteyal benefit—fer yer benefit an' mine. In you I behold a splendid specimen-brick o' perfectual manhood; a geolorious combination o' Hercules an' Samson; a gladiatorial conglomeration o' both. Thar's money in you, sir, heaps o' golden shiners, fortunes, millions, sir, but it always requires capital and experience to develop an' introduce new territory before the people."

"You, sir, are a fortune for yourself, an' a diminutive remuneration to me, providin' we can cum to satisfactory terms, which I'm quite sangywine in my expectations that we can, in short order."

"Now, my respected sir, my plan is this: in my pocket, heer, I have a blank check-book, an' on the stand yander ar' pen an' ink. By fillin' out a very small piece o' paper an' affixin' there to the name o' ex-Confederate Chauncey Tupper, Esq., I can make you ten thousand dollars 'plumper' than you ar' at this individual minit. See?"

"Well, yes. You mean to say that you can give me a check on the bank for that amount, do you not?"

"Precisely, precisely, my dear sir. I am good for three times ten on any bank between heer an' F'risco. The name of ex-Confederate Colonel C. H. Tupper is one that will be handed down in posterity. My name is good for forty thousand from the North Pole to the South; from the East Pole to the West. Up in Sacramento all ye've got to do is tew say 'Tupper' tew the bar-tender, and he'll immediately produce the bug-juice."

"Now, as I sed before, my dear sir, I'll tell you just what I will do, so listen attentively unto what I say."

"If you will engage yourself to me for one year, I will write you out a check for ten thousand dollars, board and feed you, and as soon as the excitement ar' caved in heer, I'll travel around the country wi' you, an' bear your expenses then."

Wildcat Bob eyed the speaker a moment, as if he were dumbfounded, and then said:

"And what in the name of Julius Caesar, man, do you require me to do?"

The colonel chuckled audibly.

"I require you to lick every man that I put up against you!"

"With my hands, or with deadly weapons?" asked the bruiser eagerly.

"With those fists of yours."

"What is your object in causing you to make such a venture, colonel?"

"Notoriety, sir, and gold; gold that makes men kings in this world we live in, sir. This is my plan at present: every night I will match some one against you, and thereby attract large crowds to the saloon, for you know the biggest crowd allus goes where thar's excitement."

"Of course I will so get a large share o' my unlucky neighbor's custom, an' as big audience"

are allus thirsty, why, what is a more natural consequence than that they should lubricate at my bar? See? Then, too, thar'll be plenty o' bettin' afoot, an' ef Colonel Chauncey Tupper don't rake in his share o' the stakes, ye kin call him a jack-mule, 'ca'se, ye see, he'll be bettin' on a sure thing."

"Humph!" said Wildcat Bob, with a smile at the colonel's enthusiasm. "Supposin' I should get knocked out of time by some fellow?"

"It will be to your own interest ter bu'st everything that comes in your way," was the reply; "fer I shell hev et in ther barg'in thet every time ye let emy feller muss you over, thet you're to fork me over one hundred gold dollars out o' your salary. Now, then, w'at d'ye think of it, an' will ye accept or no?"

"I will accept!" responded Wildcat Bob, quickly. "Your terms suit me, and, as I can put off other business for the present, I will accept; so draw up your papers and so forth. I suppose I am to have my days to myself?"

"Well, yes, though I would prefer to have you within call, shed them fellers take inter their heads to come back an' give us a visit."

"You have reference to the Big Hank and his crowd?"

"Yes, I believe that fellow means mischief to this place."

"Perhaps. At least it will be well enough to keep on your guard. As for me, I will not be far off when they come. Now, when do you propose to commence this little entertainment of yours?"

"By to-morrow night, if I can hunt up a man to put up ag'in' you."

"Until then I am free, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

The colonel then wrote up an agreement, which was duly read, signed, and witnessed, and ere an hour had elapsed the handsome young pugilist was in possession of a check on the bank of San Francisco for ten thousand dollars.

He had no fears but what he could draw the money. Colonel Tupper had been a prominent speculator once in California, and had made his millions.

After the bargain was duly made, the crowd were called up and treated by the colonel, while he made known to them what a treat they might expect.

Wildcat Bob then mounted his horse and rode away. In passing the forsaken "Heifer Shebang," he peered in, but could see no one visible, so he kept on without stopping.

After he had gone out of speaking range, a female came to the door, regarded him a few moments, and then shook her clenched fist after him.

It was Kitty Aymer—she whom the dying John Cameron had caused to swear enmity to the young pugilist.

Nothing of importance occurred in Pompeii's gulch that night, aside from the customary quarrels that arose from disputes at the card and faro tables. In the morning that dawned bright and pleasant, all the miners sallied forth to their respective claims, to repair damages wrought by the storm, and to recommence their labor. Most all of the sluice-boxes had been washed away, and it took a good half-day's toil to properly replace them.

Most of the claims were in the gulch bottom, a few hundred feet south of the two saloons, and extending along for a mile or more, terminated as abruptly as they had begun.

It was strange, but no gold could be found beyond such a distance in either direction, as frequent searches had attested.

What of the precious metals was found, therefore, was produced by panning out the rich sands of the bottom. Each claim was worked industriously, and the gold-yield well repaid the miners for their toilsome work.

A "claim" consists of such an amount of ground, carefully staked out, which belongs solely to the purchaser, and woe be to the greedy man who, on the sly, attempts to dig over into his neighbor's sand. The intrusion is generally settled with pistols.

I have known several deaths to occur in a day, in the Golden City mines, just from this same cause. One miner, thinking to dip over and test his neighbor's sand, was shot through the heart, the next moment, and instantly killed.

At night as well as by day do miners have to keep an eye on their property.

By noon everything was working nicely in the Pompeii claims. It is a strange and busy scene to behold a hundred or more miners, belonging to all classes and grades, to be found between the rising and the setting sun, at work sifting and washing the richly strewn sands—each man greedy lest his neighbor shall pan out more of the precious metal than himself.

During the day, the stage brought down another swarm of fortune-seekers to Pompeii, and one out of the lot made his way directly down among the diggers in the bottom. He was certainly an odd-looking personage, and at once attracted a deal of attention.

He was fully six and a-half feet in height, and as lank and illy-proportioned as could well be imagined. His hair was red, his eyes light-blue, and his features slightly cadaverous. His

clothing was loose and much too short, and of the coarsest material, while on his head he wore a battered "stove-pipe" of the most ancient pattern.

As he came trudging up, carrying in either hand a heavy carpet-bag, a crowd of miners left their work and gathered about him.

He was the first to speak.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a softly modulated voice, "allow me to introduce myself to you. I am Professor Philander C. Doerflinger, high graduate in science and pharmacy at Yale College, and medical agent for the University of Pennsylvania. Allow me to exhibit before your gaze the triumph of the age—the medicinal wonder of the Nineteenth century!" By a deft movement he extracted from one of his carpet-bags a glass two-ounce bottle, filled with a clear sparkling liquid.

"There!" he continued, holding the vial up by the neck so all could see, "is the glorious success—the far-sought but never-before-attained elixir of life! the remedy that causes the mortal body to know no pain, no suffering, no sorrow. Why, sirs, it is the most astounding benefactor of the public ever known."

"It will cure asthma, coughs, spitting of blood, whooping-cough, seven-year's itch, hoarseness, consumption and inflammatory rheumatism; it will eradicate corns, bunions, warts, and restore frozen feet to their natural state; it will produce new hair on bald heads, and effectually obliterate and extract the stain from linen, outer-garments, and the character of mankind; it will free you men from the gripes after a hard supper, and cause you to have a cheerful disposition; it will save men from depression of spirits and bankruptcy, and the ladies from the epidemic of high-heeled shoes and chignons; it will cause you to cease mourning for your defunct mother-in-law, and last, but not essentially least, it will put money in your individual pocket."

"Now, gentlemen, having a few bottles of this Elixir of Sodom left, I propose to close them out at ten cents each, or ten for a dollar, which is dog-cheap considering the efficacy of the wonderful remedy."

"Who will try a bottle, now? Who is afflicted with the ills that the human flesh is heir to? Only ten cents, recollect, for the panacea that makes a man twice a man!"

None of the miners appeared to be out of health, and therefore needed not the tendered medicine.

"Buy it! buy it!" expostulated Professor Doerflinger, flinging himself about in true John B. Gough style; "buy the great specific medicine that exterminates alike both bed-bugs and the disease of the human race. Here, sir,"—to a grisly old knight of the "cradle"—here, sir! Just take this little bottle in your hand, and look at it, smell of it, and its triumphal powers will assert itself to you!"

The miner took the bottle with a curious grin, and raised it to the end of his nose. Then he uncorked it, and raised it to his nose again. Then he lowered it, and gazed at it for the space of a moment, as if in doubt. But that doubt instantly vanished, and the next moment the contents of the little vial were gurgling down the old man's throat.

The other miners looked on with astonishment depicted on their rugged faces, and Professor Philander Doerflinger with a knowing smile:

"There!" he exclaimed, as the "patient" handed back the empty bottle—"there, now, is that not the most exquisite remedy you ever tasted?"

"Waal, y-e-s," replied Jack Carner, smacking his lips with appreciative gusto; "thet ar' bove anythin' I ever slipped down my gullet. Went down slick as a whistle. Reckon ye mought giv me another jag, stranger!"

Another sample of the Elixir of Sodom was produced, and "downed" in the same suspicious manner; then the miner forked over the requisite cash, and trudged away to his work.

But his companions hovered doubtfully about the professor, standing first on one foot and then on the other; while they wrestled with themselves as to whether they had better invest or not. What the secret was they could not imagine, and the "medical agent" refused to explain.

Finally, one bolder than the rest, stepped up and purchased a bottle, uncorked and smelled of it, and then allowed the contents to disappear within the precincts of his stomach.

Another and another, and still another followed his example, and then the intelligent and appreciative winks that began to come from the eyes of those initiated ones, caused others to invest capital in the wonderful panacea.

Inside of ten moments Professor Philander C. Doerflinger had nothing but empty bottles in his carpet-bags, and also had a round little sum of gold in his pocket, while the miners dispersed to their work with satisfied grins on their faces.

"Good 'medicine," said one.

"Tip-top, you bet!" responded another.

"Better'n w'at ye git off of old Tupper!" grunted a third.

"Yes, a darned sight cheeper," ventured a fourth. "It's better'n I ever see'd up in thes country."

"Course it ar'," all agreed. "It's ther best whisky I've had since leavin' the States."

That explained it.

The "medicine" of Professor Doerflinger was nothing more or less than a glass of the purest liquor put in a bottle, and sold for the remarkable cheap price of ten cents a swig.

In those days, at most any shop west of the Missouri, the same amount of an article much inferior, would have cost twenty-five cents, at least.

The arrivals that day at the mines filled to overflowing both the "Spread-Eagle" and "Heifer Shebang" saloons, and made business very lively.

About sunset Wildcat Bob put in an appearance, and was heartily welcomed by Colonel Tupper, for the speculative colonel had been somewhat doubtful, lest the young pugilist should not return to play his engagement.

But he did return, looking strong and cheerful, and the colonel at once felt confident of success.

"Thar's your man fer to-night!" he whispered, pointing toward the back end of the bar-room, to where a large, strapping fellow was standing, engaged at an enormous pipe.

"That's Chucky White from 'Cisco, and I've engaged him to lick you to-night. So look well to your fists."

"Is he used to fist-slingin'?" asked Bob, eying his man from head to foot.

"Is he? Well, now, my dear sir, I jest reckon he is. Thar's them as say as he kin fell a buffalo wi' his fist!"

"Bah! that is an exaggeration," was the decisive reply. "The man does not live that can do that little job. How is trade—picking up a little, eh?"

"Exactly! exactly! Couldn't expect it better, sir, couldn't expect it."

"I am glad to hear of it. Now, I think of it, do you know of a man about these diggings named Cameron—John Cameron?"

"No, I b'leve not, or, at least, do not remember of having heard the name."

"I rather expected to find him here," said the pugilist, carelessly; then he turned away, and went down to where the miners were at work in the gulch.

They received him with nods of approval, for the bruiser had won a place in their hearts from the hour they had seen him "lay out" Big Hank.

About dusk the miners ceased work, and Wildcat with the rest returned to the "Spread Eagle."

On the steps he met Chucky White, the bruiser from California. He was a powerfully-built man of about thirty years, and had evidently been under late training, for his muscles stood out prominently, and he was not incumbered with superfluous flesh.

Some one had probably told him who was to be his adversary in the coming contest, for he tapped the Boss Bruiser familiarly on the shoulder.

"You are Wildcat Bob!" he said, his tone more positive than inquiring.

"Well, yes, I am called that," was the pleasant reply, and the Boss Bruiser from Denver extended his hand, which the other shook. "You, I suppose, are Chucky White of San Francisco?"

"That's me, young man, that's me. I'm Chucky White, the champion of the golden State of California. The host in heer tells me as ye're the huckleberry as is goin' to try to stand up before me, to-night. How about it; is that so?"

"No," said Wildcat Bob, quickly. "I am not going to try to stand up before you. Oh! no. I'm going to do it!"

The Californian laughed, sarcastically.

"Bah!" he retorted, snapping his thumb and finger together, in contempt, "you are too sanguine, youngster, entirely too sanguine. Why, sir, I am the Champion Bruiser of California, and have broken the necks of more men than you ever fought, all put together."

"Your assertion is too broad to be easily credited," laughed Bob, picking his splendid teeth, and surveying the braggart from top to toe. "Had you told me that you had been bluffed off by that many men, perhaps I might have believed you."

Chucky White grew red in the face, and suddenly fetching up his huge fist, made a pass at Wildcat Bob's head. But, that ever-watchful gentleman was on his guard, and parrying the blow—which was a tremendous one—with his left arm, he put in a "settler" between the champion's eyes with the fist of the right, quicker than a flash of lightning.

Mr. Chucky White tumbled to the ground all in a heap, and lay quite senseless where he had fallen.

"Hello!" cried Colonel Tupper, suddenly appearing at the door. "What the deuce is the matter?"

"Nothing much!" laughed the young pugilist, coolly. "This fellow tried to strike me, and I got one in ahead of him; that's all. Let him lay here and cool off; it'll do him good."

And as Mr. White had no pals to take him up, he was left to recover as best he could.

Half an hour later, to the surprise of all, a

posse of mounted cavalry, twenty-five in number, and headed by a Lieutenant of Horse, dashed suddenly down before the doors of the "Spread Eagle" saloon, and drew rein.

Col. Tupper immediately filled the doorway with his plethoric form, and demanded to know what was wanted, to which the lieutenant replied:

"I am in pursuit of a wife-murderer, whom I have followed here from Denver, and I demand that you deliver him over into custody."

"Exactly!" said the worthy colonel, throwing all the pomposity and hauteur possible into his position, "but would you be so kind as to mention the name of the man you seek?"

"Certainly. His name is Robert Beecher, and we have a warrant for his arrest for the murder of his wife, in St. Louis, three years ago. He has been repeatedly trapped by us, but has always managed to slip away. I think we've got him sure, now, however!"

"I think not!" replied Col. Tupper. "I have no man here by that name."

"That makes no difference," replied the officer, with a mocking smile. "You have a distinguished bruiser here called Wildcat Bob, and Wildcat Bob and Robert Beecher are one. Men, surround the—"

"Hold!" cried the young pugilist, springing into the doorway, a cocked revolver in either hand. "I'll settle this affair. Lieutenant Per-ton, I am here. You have hounded me from place to place, because you wish to take some one for a crime I did not do, and you had just as lief take me as the real murderer. Full twenty times have I told you I am innocent, but all to no avail. Now, then, I am tired of this. *The first man who offers to lay a hand on me, I will shoot through the heart!*"

CHAPTER VII.

TRACKING THE RUNAWAYS.

WHEN Charles Seton swooned and fell to the floor of his library, the hideous face was withdrawn from the pane of the glass door, and the owner of that face fled shrieking off into the night.

The hours went drearily by, and Mrs. Seton crouched at the hearth of the kitchen fire, and anxiously waited for her daughter's return. But she came not, and the poor mother grew more and more distressed, until finally she could bear the loneliness that had crept over the mansion no longer; and rising, she tiptoed her way to the library door, and peered into the silent apartment. There on the carpet lay outstretched the form of her husband, still and white. She uttered a scream of alarm and sprung to his side. Kneeling by him she raised his head into her lap. His teeth were tightly set, and an awful pallor was on his contracted features.

Was he dead?

No! his pulse still beat faintly, as also did his heart.

Instantly she flew back into the kitchen, and procuring water dashed it into his face. A few moments passed; then he gave a convulsive gasp, opened his eyes, and sat up.

"Ugh!" he grunted, wiping his face, and staring about, doubtfully.

Then his mind seemed to revert to the horrible face he had seen at the window-door, for he glanced that way, trembling in every joint.

"Where is it?" he gasped, rubbing his eyes to make sure that it had really disappeared—"where is it?"

"Where is what, dear?" asked Mrs. Seton, pushing back his disheveled hair. "What do you mean?"

"The face—the horrible face!" he groaned, covering his own face with his hands. "Oh! God, I know what it was. 'Twas a phantom—a spirit from the other world come back to haunt me and drive me mad!"

"My dear—" began Mrs. Seton, at a loss to comprehend. But he interrupted her by pushing her rudely to one side, and leaping to his feet.

Going to the door he opened it and peered out into the dark, wet night.

Way down across the slope he could see the lights in the settlement, but a single glance satisfied him that the owner of that hideous face, whether it be human or ghostly, had gone.

"What time is it?" he asked, turning back into the library and glancing at the little clock that ticked noisily on the mantel shelf. "What! can it be possible that it is midnight?"

"Yes, it is past that hour," replied Mrs. Seton, "for this clock is half an hour slow, dear."

Charles Seton uttered a curse.

"The girl," he growled; "has she returned yet?"

"No, Charles, she has not. I have been worrying about her, and cannot imagine what keeps her. Come to think, there's a ball at the village to-night, but I should not think Amber would go there—"

"Devils, no!" thundered the land-agent, angrily, as he paced up and down the long apartment.

"There's not where she's gone; of course not. She's run off with that accursed whelp, Thorpe Bloodgood, and you're to blame for it!"

"'Tis false! I am not!" exclaimed Mrs. Seton, bursting into tears. "I knew no more of their intimacy than you did yourself."

"Pish!" sneered the husband, contemptuously; "I wouldn't believe you under oath, you old she-wretch. Get out of my sight, before I give you the toe of my boot. To-morrow I will follow the maneuvering fools, and if they see sunset, *alive*, it shall not be my fault!"

"Oh! Charles! Charles! you would not harm our child—our Amber?"

"Wouldn't I? Well now we'll see about it. No child or woman of mine shall play underhand tricks on me, and come out well, I'll assure you. Now, go!"

Sobbing as if her heart would break, Mrs. Seton obeyed, and the angry land-agent was left to himself and his own savage thoughts.

All night he paced up and down the room like a caged lion.

As soon as it was barely light he went up to his room, and attired himself carefully for a long ride.

"These will do the business!" he muttered, taking a pair of handsomely-mounted revolvers from his bureau drawer and slipping them into a belt he had buckled about his waist. "I'll be cursed if I don't make it hot for the young fools to pay for this trouble!"

After equipping himself satisfactorily, he descended to the kitchen, where he found Mrs. Seton preparing breakfast.

"You will wait to eat?" she said, inquiringly, as he entered.

"No," he growled, "I want nothing. I am going, now, and shall not come back till I get through with this runaway business. There, there, none of your sniveling. Get me my rifle, and, mind you, be quick about it!"

She obeyed, and fetched out a superb sporting rifle from a closet behind the fire-place. He took it, and was fastening it behind his back when there came a heavy knock at the door.

Mrs. Seton opened it, half expecting to see her child, but in this she was doomed to disappointment. Major Bloodgood was standing on the threshold, a pleasant smile on his jovial countenance.

"Good-morning," he said, raising his polished beaver, politely. "Is the gentleman of the house about?"

Charles Seton stepped forward.

"Yes, I am here," he said, in a cold, harsh tone. "What do you want of me, may I inquire?"

"Well, th-the fact is," began the major, with some hesitation, "I thought I would drop over and ask you if you have the least idea what has become of my son, Thorpe?"

"Certainly not!" was the haughty reply. "I do not make it a point to meddle with other people's affairs; therefore I am not aware of the present whereabouts of your son. In turn, I might as well ask you: have you the least idea what has become of my daughter, Amber?"

"Certainly not!" retorted the major, good-humoredly; "not the least, sir. But it is my opinion that my son and your daughter have taken the same trail, wherever they are. Yes, jes' so, jes' so—they have skeddaddled together. Ha! ha! ha!"

And the major laughed as if it were an enjoyable escapade.

Charles Seton did *not* laugh, however; but, instead of a laugh, a curse issued from between his set teeth.

"I see nothing to laugh about!" he growled, sullenly.

"Nor do I see anything to cry over," responded the major. "I never make it a practice to cry over spilt milk!"

"No; I should say not. Well, as for me, I do not believe in disobedience; and if I catch the fools, they shall not escape punishment, I can promise you. Now, have you said all you wish? for, if you have, I must bring this interview to a close. I am about to set out on the track of the runaways."

"Not quite all," replied the major, coolly. "If you should see my son, I have a letter here, I wish you would deliver to him."

He placed a sealed envelope in the land-agent's hands, and then wheeled about and strode toward his own mansion.

Charles Seton glared after him for a few moments, with a terrible blaze in his blood-shot eyes. Then he thrust the letter into his pocket, and left the house on his way to the corral in the rear.

In ten minutes he had mounted his horse, and was galloping toward the settlement.

"I'll know what is in this letter, now!" he muttered, when he was out of sight of the major's house. "Maybe it will throw some light on the subject; at least, it won't do no harm for me to read it."

Deliberately he tore off the end of the envelope, and took out a folded sheet of paper.

This is what the schemer said:

"THORPE:—Say nothing of what we know, when this is given you. MAJ. B."

That was all, but it was enough to cause Charles Seton's face to flame with a terrible ferocity and rage.

"They know!" he gasped, biting his lip savagely, "and now, I shall have to be constantly

on my guard. Curse the fatality that ever brought them here. But, let that pass; they are here, now, and I shall keep watch of them. My first plan of action will be to kill this young rascal who has enticed my girl away. I know pretty well where they are, the fools, though I would not admit it to Bloodgood.

"Seven or eight miles eastward is an island in a pond, called McVeigh's Frog Paradise by the old trappers. On that island resides old Pierre Sault, a Canadian priest, and they have gone to him for his services. The girl knows him, for she has been there many times. While they are there, with a band of armed men I'll pounce down upon them, and make it a bad job for them, or I'm a liar."

In a short time the land-agent reached the settlement, and drew rein before a quoit ground, where some half-a-dozen loafers were lounging, watching two of their company pitching quoits.

Charles Seton was not a popular man among the rough, unsettled class that made up the population of Harper's but, in consequence of his wealth, and from the fact that he controlled much of the land about the settlement, he was held in awe, more than respect.

All the Harperites had a passion for money, if it did not require manual labor to procure it, and they well knew that when the haughty land-agent deigned to seek their presence, it was for a purpose—that it meant money in their pockets.

As he rode up, the game stopped, and all eyes were turned upon him.

"Is Jim Bings here?" he asked, scanning the crowd keenly.

"Here I am, Mister Seton," replied a squeaky voice, and a little bow-legged old fellow rose from the green. "D'ye want anything o' me, sar?"

"Yes, Bings, I have need of your services; also, I want a few ready men to accompany me, who can fight and are willing to work for their money. Do you know of any?"

"Hyar! hyar!" spoke up the loungers, quickly. "We'll go wi' ye! we're yer sardeens! We'll work dog cheap."

"Very well. Hurry up and arm yourselves, and mount your horses, and I'll make it worth your while if you will help me."

Jim Bings and the whole crowd instantly dispersed, and Charles Seton turned his horse's head toward the village. Here, dismounting, he entered the bar-room and called for liquor.

"How long since you saw Thorpe Bloodgood about?" he asked, after gulping down a glass of the fiery stimulant, and paying for it. He knew that young Bloodgood often came down to the village, and was a friend of Johnny Keese, the bartender; therefore, the question.

"Yesterday, I believe," replied Johnny, raking in the cash; "yesterday, just before dusk. Why?"

"Oh, nothing much. Didn't hear him say where he was going, eh?"

"No; he very rarely tells me his secrets, you know. Looking for him?"

"Well, y-e-s; that is, I should like to know where he has gone. Reckon I know about where he is, though."

"Where? Over to old Pierre Sault's?"

"Yes."

"Well, perhaps he is. I don't know anything about it, I'm sure."

At this juncture Jim Bings and seven of his associates came galloping up, and seeing the land-agent inside the barroom they all came scrambling in, pell-mell, and ranged themselves alongside the bar.

"I'll take bug-juice fer mine," said Bings, unblushingly, and the land-agent was compelled to order out the bottle.

After all had satisfied their appetites, the order was given to mount, and in a short time the cavalcade, headed by Charles Seton, were on their way toward McVeigh's Frog Paradise.

As they galloped along the land-agent made known to Bings the plan he had in view. He proposed to make a dash into the pond and swim the horses to the island, when the inmates of the priest's cabin would be at their mercy.

Charles Seton intended to show no mercy to his daughter. He was a purely selfish man, and would let no obstacle stand in his path that was dangerous, when money or weapon could remove it. And Amber Seton, the wife of young Bloodgood and consequently the mistress of his secrets, would be extremely dangerous, so the schemer told himself.

Both must be silenced.

Two hours' swift ride over a rough and rocky portion of country brought them into a tract of lowland, where lay a pond of sluggish water, two or three acres in extent. Three sides were locked by a belt of timber, while on the fourth a large flag-bog stretched off for miles.

In the depths of this marsh, which was dangerous to enter on account of the treacherous quicksands, innumerable armies of bullfrogs croaked day in and day out all the year around.

Hence, the name applied by many of the old trappers: McVeigh's Frog Paradise. In the center of the lake was an island of about half an acre, on which was built a substantial log-cabin. Here resided the old Canadian trapper and priest, Pierre Sault, to whom Charles Seton

believed Thorpe Bloodgood had come with his runaway daughter.

All was silent about the island, when the cavalcade came to a halt on the lake shore, but a column of smoke curling from the cabin chimney evidenced the presence of life within the rude walls.

"Is that the place?" asked old Jim, turning to the land-agent, who was examining his revolvers.

"Yes. Are you all ready?"

"All ready!" was the response.

The next moment the horses plunged into the lake. While they were swimming and floundering in the water Charles Seton beheld the priest, Bloodgood and his daughter slip from the cabin, hurry to the opposite side of the island, and clamber into a boat.

In an instant he divined their intention. They were making for the marsh!

CHAPTER VIII.

A MYSTERIOUS RELIEF—THE PRIZE FIGHT.

"THE first man who offers to lay a hand on me I'll shoot through the heart!"

Clearly the words rung out on the crisp evening air, and every man knew that Wildcat Bob meant what he said. Two cocked revolvers were leveled at the soldiery, and there was not a tremor in the hands that held them. Fire of desperate determination flashed from the eye of the pugilist—fire that made Lieutenant Perton fear for his personal safety.

"Put down those weapons," he said, his face red with passion.

"When I put them down," replied Wildcat, coolly, "there will be several dead soldiers around here, unless you take the last chance I give you to get out of pistol range. I do not wish to kill you, sir officer; I do not wish to kill any one unless driven to it. My name is Robert T. Bancroft. You are in search of Robert Beecher. Go find him, and leave me peaceably alone. If you do not, I shall not hold myself responsible for what occurs. Now, sir, I have said my say. I'll shoot, as I said before, the first man who offers to lay a hand on me!"

"You forget," argued Lieutenant Perton, with as much calmness as he could command, "you forget, that in the name of the law of the United States of America, we can call upon those men in your rear to assist in your capture. What could you hope to do against all of us? Why, nothing, absolutely nothing, sir. You had better surrender without trouble, as we shall take you, anyhow!"

Wildcat Bob laughed, outright.

"Don't count your chickens before they're hatched," he replied, sarcastically. "I rather think some of these fellows will stick by me. Eh! boys?"

"Yes, hurra!" shouted the motley crowd, who were anxiously awaiting developments. "Three cheers for ther Boss Bruiser!"

And they were clamorously rendered by a hundred stentorian voices from within.

"You see?" nodded Bob, triumphantly.

"You will stand no show."

"That settles it!" cried the lieutenant, fiercely. "I will take you, Robert Beecher, even though I have to wade through blood to get you."

"Comrades, charge! take yon murderer alive, and spare the lives of those only who offer you no hindrance."

Then there was a responding shout from the soldiery, and leaping from their horses they drew their sabers and made a rush toward the saloon.

Once! twice! thrice! the hunted pugilist fired, and he dropped a man for every shot spent.

Then he hurled the weapons away from him, and placing his two hands to his lips he gave vent to a long, wild scream like that of an agonized wildcat—a scream that echoed and re-echoed over hill and valley.

For a moment the cavalymen hesitated, not exactly knowing what to make of it. Then there came back on the night breeze a series of loud screams similar to those uttered by the bruiser, and the next instant a band of fifty masked horsemen, armed with polished carbines and dressed in the garb of Spanish mountain men, came pouring madly over the hill-top into the gulch, uttering yells of vengeance.

Lieutenant Perton gave one glance at the tall, erect figure with flowing black hair and mustache, who led them, and his face grew white with terror.

"Mount! fly! scatter!" he shrieked, and plunging the spurs into the side of his spirited steed he was off like the wind, up the gulch.

Quickly his followers leaped into their saddles, and dashed in swift pursuit, and the band whose very presence was such a terror, halted halfway down the slope, and sent a few harmless shots after the fugitives.

Then, when all had disappeared, the tall, wild-looking leader waved his sombrero toward Wildcat Bob, who returned the salutation, after which the whole band rode leisurely up over the ridge and was seen no more.

Here was certainly a mystery.

But none of those who had witnessed the strange scene felt called upon to ask for an explanation, just then.

As for Wildcat Bob, he was quite composed, and not at all excited over the affair, and as soon as the mysterious band was gone, he turned to the colonel.

"Well, sir, what is your opinion of the case? The brave soldiers rather got the worst of it, eh?"

"Exactly! exactly! my son, exactly! It wer' an admirable eend for a drama, sir—an admirable one. I expected to see ye hacked inter pieces!"

"You did? Humph! I reckon no one ever fools wi' a wildcat without getting clawed, more or less."

"Wal, p'rhaps that is so. S'pose ye know who them fellars war thet cum ter your screech?"

"Yes, I know who they are," was the brief reply. Then the young prize-fighter went into the saloon.

In the course of a half-hour Mr. Chucky White put in an appearance, with a dirty handkerchief tied across his discolored brow.

Wildcat Bob was standing by a table in the rear of the saloon, watching a game of faro, when the Champion of California came striding up.

"Well?" he interrogated, for he saw that Mr. White had something to communicate; "what is your opinion of rats, now, sir?"

"See here," whispered the vanquished champion, pulling him aside and taking his hand; between you and me, young man, if you'd have no objections, I'd like to have you tell me what that was you hit me with!"

"What would you suppose?"

"I hain't the least idear, sir. It war sumthin' awful, I'll warrant. Why, sir, I've been kicked by the hind feet of the biggest he-mule in California, and trod on by one o' Dan Rice's heaviest elephants, but them warn't a sarcumstance tew ther shock ye just give my upper system. Don't use steel knuckles nor cobblestones ag'in I beg o' ye."

"Certainly not. All the weapon I used to-day, or ever use, are these," and the Boss Bruiser displayed as handsome a pair of fists as a man ever boasted of. "These answer my purpose in all pugilistic contests."

Mr. White examined them minutely, and heaved a sigh.

He doubtless felt very dubious of standing up before them in the coming set-to. He was too wise to say so, however, and soon went off to prepare himself for the battle.

The fight was not to come off until about nine o'clock in the evening, and so the boss had plenty of time to pass away in the meanwhile.

After watching the faro-bank for some time, he laid a gold eagle on the table, and in return was given ten round ivory checks. These he deposited on the queen of hearts. Hitherto kings had been sweeping the board, but by a strange chance, the queen won this time, and twenty ivories were in the bruiser's hands. Fifteen of these he placed on the queen of diamonds, and—lost.

Nothing loth, he placed his remaining five on the same card, and was fortunate enough to win. Ten, he had now, and these he clapped down on the king of hearts. He won.

Still he was not satisfied, but placed the whole twenty on the king again. And again he won, and forty checks were his. For these he took four tens, and placed all four on queen of hearts, which, strange to say, won. Eight tens were now placed by him on the same lucky card.

Queens won!

Great was the excitement about the table, as with a triumphant smile he laid down his ivories, and called for eight twenties.

"You'd better quit wi' a hundred and sixty dollars," growled the banker, as he reluctantly dealt out the requisite checks, fer yer luck may change this next time a-comin'."

"Yes, and again it may not," was the cool retort. "If I lose I'm able to stand it; if you lose all the better."

The gambler uttered a curse; then the game went on.

This time Wildcat Bob hesitated a few moments before "planking" for he was not quite sure where to make a stroke. But at last, however, he slapped his whole pile on the king of diamonds, and yells of astonishment and incredulity filled the room, as it was discovered that he had won again! and three hundred and twenty dollars worth of checks was his.

"The bank's broke!" growled the gambler, flinging out the amount in bills due the lucky pugilist. "There, take yer cash and git."

"You bet!" replied Wildcat, with a satisfied nod, and gathering up the bills he sauntered off.

Soon he came across a miner, seated in an obscure corner, who was looking very sad and dejected. His face wore a haggard expression, and there were traces on it that told he had been weeping.

He looked up so piteously as the young prize-fighter came up, that the latter could not pass by without pausing to inquire the cause of his despondency.

"You look rather down in the mouth!" he said, in his jovial, good-natured way, as he came to a halt. "Something gone wrong, eh?"

"Yes, young man, everything has gone wrong,

and I am sick of life. I came out here from Illinois, to dig gold, and left my wife and her babes all alone. To-day I got a letter that both of 'em are dead and my wife is sick abed."

"Oh! well, you must cheer up. She will perhaps be well again when you hear from her, you know."

"Oh! no!" groaned the man, wringing his hands in agony; "she will never recover, my Alice, my sweet little wife. Why, oh! why was I ever so rash as to leave her? It is not of disease that she is dying, sir; oh! no! It is of starvation! just think of it, sir—starvation, and I have not a nickel to send her, not a cent to carry me back to her. Were I there I could work and get money. I could keep her from starving. To-day when I received the letter I had a hundred dollars' worth of gold. Hoping to double, and thereby earn enough to take me a quick passage home and having something left over, I invested every cent I had in faro-checks, and lo-s-t—"

Here the man quite broke down, and wept as if his heart would break. Wildcat Bob gazed at him searchingly, for he knew not but what the grief was bogus. He had seen men up in Denver who told the same sort of a story and manifested the most violent grief, just to draw money which they would subsequently spend for whisky at the bar.

"What is your name?" he asked, half afraid to interrupt the passionate outbreak of sobs.

"My name is Philip Lincoln, sir."

"Where do you reside when at home?"

"In an inland town named R—."

"Yes. Now, would you mind showing me the letter that has caused you all this distress?"

"Certainly not. Here it is," and Philip Lincoln handed the missive out without any hesitation. Wildcat Bob then took it to a light in another part of the barroom, and scanned the contents eagerly. It had evidently been written by the wife, and was so pitiful and yet so loving that there were tears in the pugilist's eyes when he finished the perusal.

Returning to the weeping husband, he said:

"I am very sorry for you, and am satisfied that you are deserving of charity. I am not a rich man myself, but still I am always ready to help my fellow-men as far as I am able. First, come with me and take some liquor. It will help and cheer you."

"Thank you, young man, but I have never tasted whisky, and I do not wish to contract the habit of drinking at this time in my life. Thank you all the same, but you must excuse me."

"Of course I'll excuse you, old boy," and the athlete thrust out his hand warmly. "Had you accepted my invitation to drink, you would have lowered yourself in my estimation. I do not touch liquor myself, sir, and would to God that all men were like you and me in this respect. This would be a happy and prosperous world then. Here, my friend, are three hundred and twenty dollars, all but ten of which I just won at the faro-bank where you lost. Take it and leave the mines at once for your home, for this is no place for a man like you. Go to your suffering wife, and may God aid and prosper you!"

So saying, the pugilist laid the money he had won before Philip Lincoln, and was about to turn away, when the grateful man caught him back, and covered his hand with kisses.

"God bless you!" he exclaimed fervently. "But I cannot think of taking this all from you, an utter stranger. You are robbing yourself."

"No, no! my friend, I am not. When I want money there's dozens of ways to get it; besides, I have several thousand stowed away in a safe place for a rainy day—savings that, had I been a drinking man, would have went for whisky. One hundred dollars of this here money belongs rightfully to you; ten of it I make you a present of, that being the sum I invested at the gaming-table; the other two hundred and ten you can consider a donation from the crowd."

"Oh! thank you, sir, thank you. You have placed me above want for a long time, and I can return to my suffering wife. But, tell me your name, young man, so that I and my wife can both write you back our thanks."

"My name is Robert Bancroft, or, I am better known as Wildcat Bob. Do write back to me, not to express your thanks, but to tell me how you get along."

Then after a hand-shake the two men parted. By this time it was nine o'clock, the hour appointed for the prize-fight to come off, and the mammoth saloon was crammed full to overflowing to witness the sport.

After leaving Lincoln, Wildcat Bob hurried to Colonel Tupper's office back in behind the bar. As he went in he met the colonel coming out, his face wreathed with smiles.

"Hurry up," he said, in a whisper. "Yer man are dressin', an' I want ther show to commence, so's the crowd will git thirsty quick."

The Boss Bruiser nodded, and disappeared in the inner apartment. Half an hour passed, and the crowd outside were getting clamorous, when the two contestants came bounding nimbly out from behind the bar, and took their places in the ring that had been formed.

Both were naked to the belt, and were looking in splendid trim. Both were of about the same

size and development, and it was just about as probable that one would win the battle as the other.

"I'll bet five hundred dollars that Chucky White wins in three heats!" yelled a man, who had recently arrived from Golden City.

"I'll take ye!" cried Colonel Tupper; "also I have got one thousand here, in one hundred-dollar bills, that says Wildcat Bob knocks him stone blind in seven rounds!"

"Taken," said Major Bloodgood of Harper's, as he dismounted from his horse at the door and entered. And so the betting went on till a large number of bets had been "planked" and recorded, and the host had fully five thousand dollars at stake when he motioned for the contest to begin.

Both men accordingly squared off on line, and at a given word went at it. The first round was fought in three minutes, and resulted in the Californian's favor, Wildcat Bob getting a stinger in the neck that sent him spinning back to the floor. The crowd yelled and shrieked, and many who had bets on Bob, began to look a trifle dubious.

Bob was on his feet in a moment, however, and the second bout commenced. It was short and sweet, for Mr. Chucky White received the first blow in the region of his mouth, and went down.

The third round resulted again in the favor of Wildcat Bob, his adversary getting hit and knocked out of time.

The fourth was sharp and fierce, and both men put in some very effective blows. It was fought in five minutes, and as yet no blood had been drawn. This was granted to the Boss Bruiser in the fifth heat, when sending in an awful blow on the champion's proboscis, he caused him to tumble bleeding to the floor. Time, three minutes.

The sixth, Wildcat Bob took a false tumble.

The seventh round finished the fight. Wildcat Bob put in two tremendous hits in rapid succession, one in each of his opponent's eyes, and the Californian dropped to the floor quite insensible.

Anxiously the excited audience waited, and at last the champion groaned and opened his eyes.

"Enough!" he gasped—"I'm licked to suit me!" And so ended the prize-fight.

CHAPTER IX.

THROUGH THE FROG PARADISE.

"STOP them! stop them!" shrieked land-agent Seton, frantically. "Shoot them—do not let them escape! Five hundred dollars to the man that brings them to me, dead or alive!"

Thus baited, Jim Bings and his followers urged forward their horses, and gained the island by the time the fugitives had landed on the shore of the marsh. Quickly the ruffian leader brought his rifle to a level with his nose, and fired. There was a yell of agony and the priest dropped dead in his tracks. But before another bead could be drawn Thorpe Bloodgood shook his clenched fist back at his pursuers, seized Amber Seton in his arms, and turning, bounded off into the thicket of sheltering flags and brakes.

"After him! after him!" cried the infuriated land-agent, as he succeeded in gaining the island. "Fetch the young hound out of them rushes, and kill him—kill 'em both!"

"No sorter use o' follerin' 'em, now, Mister Seton," said Bings, shaking his head dubiously. "They've put their snoots in a trap this time, sure."

"Explain. What do you mean?"

Bings laughed.

"I judge they're done fer, yer honer. Them ar' bogs ar' chuck fuller o' quicksands nor a monkey's ha'r ar' o' lice. 'Tain't possible fer no human critter to git thru wi' out gittin' stuck."

"Bah! that young rascal and my girl know yon marsh better than you, and they wouldn't have gone into it if they hadn't some path in view by which they could get out."

"Waal, now, I'll bet ye a hand at poker thet they ken't git thru!"

"I shall make no bets. They must not get through, I tell you. You wish to earn five hundred dollars, among you: go ahead and chase down your game, at once."

Bings turned to his men.

But they all shook their heads. The danger attending a rush into the swamp was too great; they cared more for their lives than they did for the money.

"Ill tell you w'at we will do," said Bings, after a moment's thought; "we kin circle 'round the bog, an' watch fer 'em."

"Yes, you can do that, it is true, and while you are waiting for them outside, I will ride into the marsh and drive them out."

"You'd better not try to, Mister Seton, for more'n like's not ye'll git yerself into one o' them consarned quicksands, an' ef ye do, it's good-by Suzey, wi' you, bet yer boots. Better not try it."

"Pshaw! I do not fear it. I will drive these accursed runaways out of their retreat, and meet you on the other side of the swamp."

So saying the land-agent rode across the island, and a few moments later Bings and his

men saw him urge his horse into the water, and finally reach the shore of the marsh. Then, after he had disappeared in the high waving wilderness of flags, they swam their horses back to mainland, and divided up, one half going around the swamp one way and the other the other way. Here and there one dropped off at an assigned post, while the others went on.

In the meantime the land-agent had penetrated the marsh on his perilous mission.

At first he found a better footing for his horse than he had hoped for, and was able to make considerable progress.

But the Frog Paradise was a horrible place, at the best. On every side rose a dense forest of flags and reeds, and from their depths rose a continual chorus of dismal croaks and "chugs," as the frisky frog thrust his nose above water to see who was invading his paradise. Vicious birds flew up from their nests and darted at the trespasser with wild, unearthly screams, and more than one large, green-eyed snake thrust his head and forked tongue out at him as he rode on.

The vengeful land-agent was sure that he was on the trail of the fugitives, for on the brakes in several instances he discerned signs of their passage, and in one place he perceived a bow of ribbon that Amber had worn on her hair.

The marsh still continued to stretch away without visible limit, and as yet nothing had been seen of the two fugitives, though they could not be a great distance ahead.

About the middle of the afternoon the land-agent drew rein at the foot of a large cottonwood tree, that stood alone in its glory amid acres of dense flag thickets, and slid from the saddle.

He was tired of riding, and the everlasting croak! croak! of the monstrous bullfrogs, and the unearthly screams of fierce birds, had nearly driven him crazy.

"Curses on the fools!" he growled, as he stood glaring savagely around. "I wish they were in Hades or some other like place. Better not let me get a shot at them, if they value life!"

The tree stood on what was in fact an island, for a little moat of stagnant water, alive with pollywogs and bullfrogs, circled quite around it.

While the land-agent was resting, therefore, his steed grazed about and cropped the green leaves from the lower branches of the tree.

At last, feeling considerably refreshed, Seton mounted his horse, preparatory to resuming his toilsome journey.

But now a new thought struck him. Why not climb the tree and take observations ahead? Perhaps he would be able to sight the fugitives, and learn how far they were ahead of him.

To think was to act, and the next moment he had slipped from the saddle and was climbing the tree. It was a tall one and supplied with many leafy branches.

Half-way up, and the land-agent heard a loud, purring noise, and the next instant a panther shot downward from an overhanging limb, uttering a frightful yell. But, although the fierce beast struck the limb on which Seton sat, he did not catch a hold, and the next instant went spinning on through the lower branches toward the ground.

Peering downward the land-agent perceived to his horror, that the animal had descended directly on to the back of the horse, who, with a snort of affright, now dashed madly away through the marsh.

"Heavens! now I am without horse or food, and night coming on at that. Curses, a million times, on that young devil, Bloodgood, and my daughter!" raved the unfortunate pursuer, as he still continued to ascend the tree.

Ten moments later he reached the top, and perched himself on a suitable limb to make observations.

From here he could see to the end of the marsh, which was only about half a mile beyond, when it was met by a wide stretch of motte-dotted prairie.

The sun now was just setting, proving that it was much later than he had supposed, and the bullfrogs, peepers and night-birds had begun their distracting songs with renewed force and vigor. The denizens of Frog Paradise were evidently endeavoring to out-do themselves for the edification of their visitor.

Carefully Seton scanned the marsh intervening between the tree and the prairie. Nothing of the fugitives was to be seen. But the flags and reeds were so high that they might be only a hundred yards off, and he not see them.

"They must be hiding somewhere between here and the prairie," he muttered, as he kept up a close watch, "or else they've gone down in a quicksand!"

This was a possible theory.

But, what surety was there that they had perished? None, at all.

Even now they might have escaped and be flying far away.

"I wonder what has become of Bings and his men? I see nothing of them along the margin of the swamp. But, come to think of it, the flags hide them from my view. Ha! What was that?" At this juncture the tree in which the land-agent was seated, seemed convulsed with an awful tremor, and tottered as if it were

about to fall. For a moment Seton's hair stood on end; but his fears vanished, as, after a violent lurch, the monarch once more became quiet and passive.

"What could have caused such a tottering? I can see no solution to the affair, unless, maybe, it was jarred by the shake of an earthquake. Yes, that must have been it, though the shock of an earthquake has not been felt in this section of country for several years. Ha! a rifle-shot, sure as I am living!"

It was even so. While the land-agent had been musing the distant report of a rifle came over the marsh from the prairie, on the evening breeze. Glancing hurriedly in that direction, he beheld a sight that caused him to utter a cry of joy.

Two figures—one a man and the other a female—had emerged from the eastern end of the swamp, and were flying out over the prairie, when, as a horseman had dashed swiftly in pursuit, the man while running unslung his rifle and fired a single shot. But as the horseman did not stop, Seton supposed that he had not been hit. But in this supposition he was wrong; for the horse had not gone a hundred yards further, when its rider toppled from the saddle—dead.

"Heaven! he was hit after all!" cried the excited man, "and now they will escape on his riderless horse. No! by the furies, they must not! I can do the rest of this accursed marsh, perhaps, ere they can catch the animal. Ha! what means this? Am I dreaming, or drunk? They are now out of sight—the prairie is sinking from my view, and the swamp reeds obstruct my view, also. What does all this mean? This tree seems not half as tall as it was when I first came here. My God! can it be possible that it is sinking?"

With a face ghastly white with a horror that was creeping over him, Seton began hastily to descend from his perch. But, he had not far to go before he made the terrible discovery.

The tree had already sunken a third of its length into the earth, or, rather, into a bed of quicksand, and where had been the island on which the land-agent had lounged a short time before, was now a broad sheet of bubbling water, that, as the tree sunk lower, became larger and deeper!

And thus death stared Charles Seton in the face!

CHAPTER X.

THE LAWLESS RANGERS—IRIS WOOD'S LEGACY

ON the day after old Bill Wood had disposed of the Haunted Claim to Lamonte, he concluded it his best plan to ride over to Charles Seton's with the money, as the land-agent very rarely visited the mill, and weeks and months might pass ere he would see him.

So he saddled up one of his horses, and made ready for the journey, for it would take from dark to dark to accomplish the round trip.

"Papa, why cannot I go?" asked the miller's rosy-cheeked daughter, Iris, as she came gayly into the humble kitchen, all aglow with a beautiful bloom produced by a morning ramble in the forest. "I would so like to get away from this same tedious monotony, if only for a day."

Bill Wood drummed on the rough pine table, thoughtfully, while he gazed at the lovely face and form of his child. She was the very climax of his hopes—the idol of his heart. It was not within his power to refuse the gratification of her slightest wish, and consequently she always had her own way.

"So ye want to go along, eh? Well, I don't know's I've got any 'jections to offer, 'cause ye're a purty good sorter gal, and deserve to see more of the world. But, you must promise me not to fall head over heels in love, ag'in, like ye did when I tuk ye to Denver, last fall. Can't hev no more sich."

Iris Wood's face became very pale and set, and her great soulful eyes filled with tears.

"I promise, papa; but oh! how much would I not give to see him again."

"Tush! tush! girl. You are crazy again. Hev'n't I told ye more'n a dozen times not to think of that feller any more? An' now, heer ye ar' ag'in, wishin' ye could see him. Ef ye don't put this nonsense outen your young he'd, I'll be tempted to start ye off East, intew some boardin' skule."

"No! no! don't!" cried the tearful girl, throwing her arms about his neck, and kissing his furrowed brow. "Don't send me away from you, dear papa, and I will obey you—I will do your slightest wish—only don't send me away."

"Of course I won't, pet," and the old sawyer rubbed the moisture from the corners of his eyes, "on course I won't let ye go. Thar, now, go an' hustle on yer Sund'y-go-to-meetin' duds, an' be ready by the time I fetch around the young hoss."

Iris hurried off to attire herself for the ride, and after she had disappeared, old Bill left the cabin to catch and "slick down" the girl's saddle-horse.

"The gal's never g'in up dreamin' about that feller she see'd in Denver!" he muttered, as he tramped along; "an' though I 'hain't got much o' an inklin' o' w'at luv is, I'm skeery 'feared the gal's cotched it. Blarst the luck, annyhow."

She hedn't no bizness to go gadden' out inter the streets o' Denver, git cornered by bummers, an' then git reskied by a handsom young feller, whose first glances socked the gal he'd-over-heels inter spasms—or luv, w'ich are all 'bout the same thing."

The horse for Iris was soon procured and saddled, and when all was in readiness, father and daughter mounted and set off on their journey.

Iris was looking the embodiment of grace and beauty, as she sat on her mettlesome horse with the ease and grace of a finished equestrienne. Her garments were not of the finest fabric, to be sure; but they fitted her form to perfection; and, with the bright glow of health and happiness that suffused her cheeks, and the sparkling light in her eyes, she made as pretty a picture as any artist could wish for his canvas.

Old Bill Wood was justly proud of her, as well he might be. He had watched over and guarded her with the utmost care, and seen her grow toward a glorious womanhood, pure in soul and pure in thought. He had, off and on, purchased her such books as would serve to educate her for a better position in life, and now he beheld in her all his expectations fulfilled.

She was a beautiful and bewitching young lady, fairly educated, a skilled housekeeper, and, above all, unstained, tender and loving. He could not well ask for more.

Half of the route from the mill to Harper's Settlement, was through a wild tract of country, and through a continuous belt of pine and cottonwood timber. As the two riders journeyed through this forest, underneath archways of emerald green, the morning birds made the welkin ring with many a joyous song; the drumming of the partridge, the busy hum of insects, and the mournful sighing of the forest branches, all sounds peculiar to the woodland, made the hearts of our friends lighter, and their travel pleasant.

"Oh! this is delightful!" cried Iris, unloosening the strings of her jaunty hat, and allowing the fresh pine-scented breeze to toss her luxuriant hair into wild confusion. "I do so love to hear the birds warble their joyous melodies, and listen to nature's busy hum of industry, peace and content."

"Yes, my pet," responded the miller, fervently; "it is all grand and interesting—all the handiwork of our God;—God is truly great and good!"

"Amen!"

A voice uttered this last word—not that of the old man nor of his child. A horseman, who wheeled his steed from a forest aisle, and cantered easily by the side of the twain, was the speaker.

"Your words touched nearer the truth, senor, than any other words of praise to our Creator that I have heard for years."

A man tall and handsome of form was the speaker, with a swarthy face, that, withal, was winning; hair and mustache long, flowing, and black as the raven's wing, and eyes dark, lustrous and magnetic; he was one of a hundred whom one could admire and at the same time fear and obey. Spanish garments plentifully slashed with gold and silver clothed his graceful form; a broad slouched sombrero sat on top of his head, and a gay-colored scarf of some rare imported cloth encircled his waist, serving as a belt for a pair of superbly-mounted pistols.

Altogether he was a most extraordinary personage in appearance, and both Iris and her father eyed him, askant. People of his class and evident rank were rarely met with in this wild country, and they knew not but what he might be one of a band of outlaws, who had been reported to be hovering around the various mining settlements of Colorado, and whose daring robberies were a theme of universal conversation.

"Who'n thunder ar' you?" growled the miller, thrusting his hand toward his belt. "I don't seem to recollect you."

"Ha! ha! no!" laughed the man, showing a set of pearly teeth. "The senor is right in supposing he does not recollect me—quite right, for he never saw me before. Allow me to introduce myself, then. I am Carlos de Monterey, or better known in this part of the country as Wild Carlos!"

"My God!" gasped Bill Wood, his face growing white with fear—"y-y-you are n-not Wild Carlos, the Mine-Raider?"

"I am, senor. I am he whom the miners fear and yet hate."

"An' what ye want o' me?"

"Well, I am scarcely prepared to answer that question, as when I fell in with you I had no fixed purpose in view. Going to Harper's, I take it?"

"Yas, that's the p'int I'm bound fer. Anything more you'd like to find out?"

"Probably. Why?"

"'Ca'se when ye git thru, I'd jes' 's le've part company w' you. Ye see my gal, heer, ain't uster sech society as yours."

"Is that so? Well, perhaps you are right. But I am not so wholly bad as you think, old man. A story never loses for the telling, sir, and tongues are constantly busy working against the name of Carlos de Monterey. Crimes I never dreamed of have been associated with

me; crimes committed by another band, known as the Border Bloodhounds, are constantly being brought before the public notice, and I and my band, the Lawless Rangers, are being given the dubious credit for the same. It is to hunt down these Bloodhounds—it is to exonerate myself and men, and avenge a foul wrong, that brings Carlos de Monterey to the land of the gold-seeker."

"Humph! a likely story. P'arps ye kin explain yer conduct at ther mines," growled the miller, eying the man narrowly, whose name had long been a terror in the lower mining districts.

"I make no denial of frequent raids on fat strikes!" replied Wild Carlos, coolly. "I know I am outlawed by the world I live in, and therefore am forced to depend on outlawry for a livelihood. But, thanks be to Heaven, that I can stand before my God and say I never spilled a drop of innocent blood. Can you say the same, truthfully, old man?"

"I can," replied the miller, fervently. "I can swear it."

"I am glad to hear you say it, sir—glad to hear you say it. Few men beyond the broad Missouri can echo those words. Now, old man, to assure you that I am not wholly bad and unjust, let me tell you something. You are now on your way to Harper's to pay one hundred gold dollars—received from the sale of the Haunted Claim—to a man by the name of Seton. Is this not true?"

"Wa-a-l, yes, you've about hit the nail on the head. But, how do thet leetle fack go to prove thet ye ain't the durndest willain in market, I'd like to kno'?"

"I'll explain. A mile or two further on, you will be suddenly surrounded by some of my men, who will demand the money you have on your person. Show them this," and here Carlos de Monterey handed the miller a round gold coin about the size of an old-fashioned copper—"and you will be allowed to pursue your way, unmolested. I have no enmity against you, and even had I, the beauty of your daughter would serve you as a passport."

Old Bill Wood turned the coin over and over in the palm of his hand, and eyed it wonderingly. On one side was neatly engraved a horse flying over the prairie with a man seated on its back, holding a long lance poised, as if about to hurl it. On the opposite side were the letters "C. de M."

No sooner had Iris Wood taken the coin from her father's hand, and glanced at the engraving, than she uttered a cry of surprise.

"Why, sir, I have a coin just like this, only that the letters on it are not the same!" she exclaimed, in wonder. "The initials on mine are R. and B."

"Ha!" cried Wild Carlos, excitedly, "say you so? Then you will be passed on by my men the same as though you had my gift, which, as you have one, I will take back. Will you permit me to look at your token, senorita?"

"Certainly, sir."

The maiden took a similar coin from the pocket of her habit, and together with the first, handed it to the outlaw, who studied both, attentively.

"Whar'd ye git thet thing, gal?" demanded Wood, a trifle suspiciously.

"I'll tell you some other time," replied Iris, evasively, "but not now."

The old man frowned.

"That feller giv et to ye, w'at reskied ye, in Denver!" he declared, angrily.

"Well, perhaps, yes," said the young beauty, with a roguish smile and a blush. "Anyhow, I came by it properly."

"That she did," said the Free Ranger, returning the coin. "And a right noble young man is the giver."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I am personally acquainted with him," was the brief reply. "Now, my friends, I must leave you. Show the coin whenever or wherever you meet my Lawless Rangers, and they will not molest you; and should you be in immediate need you can safely call on them for assistance. Adieu, fair lady; good day, senor; and the next moment the dashing outlaw had wheeled his horse aside into a dense thicket, and was gone."

Iris Wood looked after him till he had disappeared, and then with a sigh turned her attention to her horse.

There was no interruption to their progress for nearly an hour, when, on emerging suddenly from the cover of the wood into an open prairie glade, they found themselves completely surrounded by a band of armed men, mounted on superb animals and armed with polished carbines. Every man was also masked with crape half-veils.

Of course the two were forced to halt, and as they did so, a man rode forward, and said:

"Senor, we are sorry to trouble you, but if you will be kind enough to hand over to us the hundred dollars you have about your person, we will allow you to pass on unmolested."

"You ar' mistaken, my gentle mule," said Old Bill, with a triumphant grin. "We've got a bit o' chink heer as sez we kin go by, scot free; so don't giv us any o' yer lip."

He took the coin from Iris' hand, and extended it to the outlaw. He gazed at it a moment, through one of the eye-holes in his mask; then raised it to his lips, after which he returned it to the miller, with a low bow.

"The senor and senorita are free to go!" he said, courteously. "The passport of Carlos de Monterey is law here."

With glad hearts the father and daughter rode on, and the outlaws all bowed an obeisance as they passed by.

"Waal! waal!" said Old Bill, when they were out of earshot, "of all ther wonderf'ul things w'at's happened sence Noahr swallowed the whale, this beats ther wonderfulest. It ar' the most cur'us thing I ever heerd of!"

Iris did not reply.

Her thoughts were of one far away from that lonely spot,—of one to whom her heart had long since gone out, with all its great wealth of maidenly love and purity. Of one who had told her that he loved her, and would sometime come back and claim her as his own little wife. Oh! how long distant that sometime seemed to be, for tender, loving Iris had heard naught of him since they had parted, except what Wild Carlos had said:

"And a right noble young man is the giver."

About noon the settlement of Harper's was reached, and shortly old Bill Wood placed the money received for the Haunted Claim in the hands of Mrs. Seton, in the absence of her husband.

Nothing would do but the father and daughter must remain to dinner, and during their stay poor Mrs. Seton related all her troubles to them; all about the elopement of her daughter with Thorpe Bloodgood, and how the unrelenting land-agent had gone off to hunt them down, and doubtless murder them.

Shortly after dinner Iris and her father set out on their return home. None of Wild Carlos' men were encountered on the way, and the mill hove in sight at sunset.

On the following morning, while Iris was washing up the breakfast dishes, and Old Bill was smoking his pipe on the back porch, both were startled to see a man enter through the open door, in evident haste.

Both father and daughter recognized him as Thomas Lamonte, the man who had purchased the Haunted Claim, and saw that his face was ghastly white.

Sinking upon a bench, near by, he motioned for Iris to draw near, while he laid a sack of something on the floor at his feet.

"There," he gasped, pointing to the sack, "are the fruits of my toil in the shaft of that accursed mine. There are twenty-three nuggets of pure gold that are worth not less than a thousand dollars each. Now, girl, tell me quickly, what is your name?"

"My name, sir?"

"Yes! yes! your name. Quick!"

"It is Iris Wood, sir."

"Stop!" cried the man, fiercely. "Do not fool with me. I cannot live many minutes, and you must tell me your real name!"

"I know of none other, than Wood."

"You do," hissed the dying miner, turning savagely upon the miller. "Tell me, for the love of God. Her name is—"

Old Bill Wood motioned him to be silent; then stooping over, whispered a few words in his ear.

"God be praised!" cried the man, and springing up, he clasped Iris in his arms, and kissed her fervently.

"There! there!" he continued, a moment later, pushing her away. "The Lord be good to you. It's yours—all of it, but half—the gold; God spar—oh! pray for—Good-by!"

The next instant the man, about whom hung such a veil of mystery, staggered back and then fell, heavily, the life-blood flowing from his mouth and nostrils and dyeing the white kitchen floor.

When Bill Wood bent to raise him, he was dead!

CHAPTER XI.

THE BEAUTIFUL ROPE-WALKER—A FEARFUL CRISIS.

EARLY on the morning subsequent to the prize-fight, Kitty Aymer obtained leave of absence of the proprietor of the "Heifer Shebang," and set off down the gulch in search of the blasted pine-tree, among the roots of which was buried the box containing the secret of her life. What little Kitty Aymer knew of her own life was a limited amount of knowledge.

Her first recollection was of living with an old Ohioan near Cleveland, who, together with his irascible wife, had treated her very badly. Once a year there came to the home a youth of striking physique, whom the old folks called their son, and who had pretty much his own way, so that during his sojourn poor Kitty was not abused quite as much. But when he would go away, the same harsh and unfeeling treatment was meted out to her. At last, when she was fourteen years of age, young John came and offered to take her away from the old folks, telling her that she was not their offspring, and that he would some day inform her who she was.

They went to Sacramento, Cal., and here,

after hiring her out as a waiter-girl in a saloon, he left her. She did not see him again for two years, when he suddenly came back and offered to marry her. She readily consented, for she had learned to love him long ago, and so they were married before a magistrate in San Francisco. That year John Cameron remained with her in the California mines, and by their united exertions they managed to save up considerable money. About the close of the year the gold fever broke out in the Pike's Peak region, and with the swarm of gold-seekers who flocked thither went John and Kitty Cameron.

Here the husband and wife quarreled, and the affair ended in Cameron's telling her that they had not been legally married; that the magistrate had been a bogus one; and, finally, that she was *not his wife*. Then he had deserted her and fled to parts unknown to her, and she was forced to depend upon her own hands for a livelihood.

They did not meet again for two years, and then it was at the beginning of the excitement in Pompeii's gulch. Kitty had gone back to her old occupation in the barroom of Mose Snicker, and her betrayer was working at the "cradle." He was greatly changed since she last saw him, and, after begging her forgiveness, he took her to Denver and they were lawfully made man and wife. This occurred two weeks previous to the death of Cameron, who all along had professed to know the parentage of her whom he had cared for, but said he was under oath not to disclose the secret until his death.

Now, Kitty sped away through the early gloaming of the morning, her young heart beating high in anticipation of what she was to find beneath the shadow of the blasted pine-tree. Oh! might she not be somebody's pet, *some one* above the humiliating drudgery of the position she now held? John had hinted once that she had no cause to blush at her birth—that she was the offspring of refined and cultivated parents. Would she ever find out who those parents were?

On she sped down the rugged, shadowy gulch, her sharp eyes scanning each side as she went in search of the blasted pine, which John Cameron had said she would find.

One, two, and three miles were traversed, and still she kept on. No tree of the description had she seen, and, literally, to find it was like hunting a needle in a haystack.

But the failure thus far did not discourage her, and she followed the gulch along, keeping a watch out on either side. At last her gaze was rewarded, and it was with a glad cry of joy that she beheld the blasted pine a few rods ahead of her, standing near the banks of the little creek.

Her heart beat wildly as she hurried forward, and a moment later stood at the foot of the great forest monarch, on the western side where her husband had said was buried the box. But, instead of joy, a feeling of rage and chagrin overcame her at what she at once perceived.

A considerable amount of dirt had been thrown up from among the roots of the tree, thereby leaving a large hole, out of which a box had been taken. This box, or, rather, a wreck of it, now lay upon the ground; but *whatever had been its contents was gone!*

"My God!" exclaimed the disappointed girl, covering her face with her hands, and bursting into tears, "it is gone, *gone!* Some one has been here and stolen the papers that contain the secret of my birth, and all is *lost!*"

Sick at heart she sunk upon the earth, and gave herself up to the most violent sobs and moans. All was lost now; all the silver lining of her life-cloud had been transformed into an awful blank, and, consequently, her existence must ever after be the same distasteful reality as before. Since Cameron's death she had hourly hoped for and expected something better, something different and more enjoyable in the tenor of her young life. Now all that dream was dissipated, and nothing remained but to go back to the old life.

Her grief and disappointment at last found relief in tears, and she wept long and bitterly, unconscious of the presence of a tall, shrouded figure that emerged from a neighboring clump of bushes, and stood before her. A figure at once startling and mysterious it was, for both face and form were hidden beneath the folds of an immense white gown, which trailed upon the ground. Like some accusing specter it stood in the presence of the weeping girl, and waited for her to look up. She did look up after a lapse of several moments, and when her red, tearful eyes rested upon that tall robed form she did not faint or scream, but just sat motionless upon the ground and stared—stared with wonder, astonishment and horror.

After a long silence between them, the spectral figure gave a rustle, and a rough, coarse voice exclaimed, in tones of authority:

"Listen, girl. W'at in the devil's the use o' yer cryin'? D'ye want ther dockyments w'at war in the box?"

"Oh! yes—yes, sir!" cried Kitty, springing to her feet, quickly. "If you have the papers, give them to me. They belong to me."

"They *do*? Wal, now, I jist squeel that they don't. W'at one finds this side of the 'Souri, generally an' hes individual property, 'les sum

other feller's big 'nuff to lick the dubbel-j'inted spurs off 'im, an' cornfiscate sed persessions. Now, I'm ther cockolorum wi' secont-growth spurs, w'at dug out them dockyments, an' consequently they're mine!"

"Oh! no, sir, they are not. They were buried here by my husband, and he told me where to find them!"

"Perzactly, my angel o' peace, perzactly. But I see'd yer spouse w'en he entombed ther anymile, hayr, an' I registrated ther spot in my noddle, an' kim back ter-day ter explore. I disemboweled ther pestillence, an' r'ed ther dockyments. Tharfore, I kno' three fingers o' bug-juice more about yer auntsisters an' antycedents, than ye do yerself. Ha! ha!"

Poor Kitty again burst into tears, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

"Let me have them—the papers; give them to me, please," she replied, reaching forth her hand blindly. "They can be of no value to you, sir, and yet, they are everything to me."

"Dixunary ag'in, sure's thunder. Ther rags hain't w'uth a shiner ter me; yit ef I war ter hand 'em over ter ye, fu'st I knowed, I'd parseeve ye cuttin' an' orful swell as a dukess or lordess or sumthin' like nor that. Jis' pictur' yerself rigged out in highfalutin toggerly o' a ginneywine queen or peeress, wi' di'monds, polished spurs, an' well-trimmed comb! Wouldn't ye be a high hen-cock o' ther elewated roost, my tearful pullet?"

Kitty did not reply. She saw that the man concealed under cover of that spectral robe was inclined to banter and jeer at her distress, and that nothing could be availed by begging him to return the stolen papers.

Therefore she resolved to adopt another measure.

"What will you ask to give those papers into my hands?" she asked, wiping away her tears. "I am willing to pay you for them."

"Wat'll I ask? Fightin' cocks an' crowin' roosters! now yer begin ter talk bizness; them's ther fust bizness-like squeeks I've hearn ye giv' this mornin'. Waal, let me reflect, an' I'll tell ye."

For some eight or ten moments the figure remained motionless, as if buried in deep thought; then the same voice said:

"Waal, I reckon ye'll hev ter work right smart ter git ther papers, gal, fer 'tain't no easy job ye'll hev ter do. Fust, ye'll hev ter *confiscate a human rooster*. D'ye kno' a feller called Wildcat Bob?"

"I do, or, that is, I have seen him."

"Good. He's yer subjeck. Ef ye'll assist to stick a knife in atwixt his fourth an' fifth left rib, an' do another job I shall plan fer ye, I will fork over yer dockyments!"

With a wildly-beating heart the young girl considered the proposal. What could she not attempt, so long as it would insure the gift to her of the papers that held the secret of her birth. Already she had sworn enmity against Wildcat Bob, at the death-scene of John Cameron, her husband.

It would be no added crime to agree to this man's proposition, then. Yes, she would take the chances, and obtain possession of the valuable papers.

"What is the other work you would require me to do?" she asked.

"What? Waal, now, ye've got me squar'. I hain't originated enny purtickler design, yit; but I'll think o' sum easy job fer you to do, w'en ye git rid o' yer subjeck, Wildcat Bob."

"Very well. You promise me, that, if I bring about the death of Wildcat Bob, you will deliver those papers to me?"

"Perzactly! or, better still, ef ye'll contrive ter take him a prisoner in sum place whar I kin reech him, I'll guv ye ther rags an' a hundred gold shiners in the bargain."

"Anything but murder. That I cannot do. But I will work to accomplish the task before me," said Kitty Aymer, setting her teeth together, resolutely. "But where can I meet and communicate with you?"

"Here. When ye've done fer ther Boss Bruiser, jes' drop a red rag hyarabouts. I'll be at yer service on the following morning."

"I can, then, depend on you?"

"Sartin, my gal, sartin. I'll be reddey ter fulfill my part o' ther agreement."

Then the spectral figure moved slowly backward, and disappeared in the thicket of bushes, and Kitty Aymer, her whole heart turned toward a desperate project, retraced her steps to the mining city of Pompeii.

That day was destined to be a gala day in the gulch.

Overland from Denver by the early morning stage, came a decided sensation and curiosity for the gold regions—a rope-walker.

A fair blonde maiden of superb figure, accompanied by an old knight of the circus arena, who was proprietor, business manager, and financial agent of the concern.

Long before noon the four sides of Col. Tupper's "Spread Eagle" had been negotiated for, at an enormous figure, and converted into the use of bulletin-boards—pasted over and papered with monster glaring posters, announcing the arrival of the wonderful "Ma Belle, the Sensational Tight-Rope Queen."

She would cross Pompeii's gulch at the deepest place, on a tight-rope that would be stretched from one side to the other, and while standing on the rope over the yawning gulf, would shoot with bow and arrow, a pigeon, let loose from a trap below into the open air.

Of course the intensest excitement, as is usual in places out of the way of ordinary amusements, prevailed in Pompeii's gulch, and as the hour appointed for the rope-walk drew near, the miner threw aside his implements and hid himself to the scene of action.

At three in the afternoon, the "city" was quite deserted, all hands having turned out, to witness the sport.

About half a mile north of the mines the gulch widened out somewhat, but on the eastern and western sides arose giant walls of rock to a great height. Looking up from the bottom of the gulch, it was fully a hundred feet to the summit of the frowning, natural parapets.

Here was laid the scene of the rope-walk. A cable was stretched across from peak to peak: Mlle. Ma Belle was to begin at the eastern side and walk over the ravine to the western side, and then retrace her steps *backwards*.

The bottom of the gulch was swarming with miners and gamblers—the population of Pompeii—long before the time arrived for the appearance of Mlle. Ma Belle.

Mons. Leek, the proprietor, had erected a small canvas tent on the eastern terminus, and in here the beauteous Ma Belle was to remain until she was wanted.

The "monsieur" was a very authoritative individual, and would allow no one of the crowd to occupy the eastern peak, with a few exceptions. Among these were Snicker and Tupper of the rival saloons, Wildcat Bob, Mr. Chucky White, and Major Bloodgood, the latter having lit down in Pompeii for speculative purposes.

As soon as the hour arrived for Mlle. Ma Belle to appear, the crowd below grew excited and enthusiastic.

Round after round of hearty cheers rent the air, and men shook and waved their hats on high.

But they became less enthusiastic when Monsieur Leek clambered down into their midst, tambourine in hand, and requested them in oily tones to shell out, cheerfully, if they wished to see the fun.

And they did shell out.

In most every instance you will find miners free with their money, for as a general rule, it comes easy and goes easy.

And, too, when there is fun ahead, they are pretty sure to "dish over" lively.

All were in a liberal vein to-day, and as a natural consequence, Mr. Leek returned to his tent with a rim full of coin, dust and nuggets, and with a satisfied expression he had not exhibited before.

Then, after delivering a speech to his grizzled audience, requesting them to make as little noise as possible, lest it might confuse mademoiselle, he jerked a bell-rope communicating with the tent, and Ma Belle came forth into view.

An outburst of amazement immediately came from all of the spectators.

They had expected to see some ordinary circus-woman, coarse and uninviting; therefore their surprise.

Ma Belle was a fair-faced, fair-haired maiden of eighteen; handsome in every lineament of countenance, and most superbly molded in form. A clear, beautiful blonde, with vivacity of expression, warm, blue eyes, and hair long and silken; she was so wholly different from what the crowd had anticipated, that, in their gratitude and pleasure, they fairly made the earth tremble with the volume of their wild shouts and huzzas.

She was neatly attired, and carried a heavy balance-pole in her hands.

After nodding to the special guests on the cliff, she advanced and waved her hand to the crowd below, after which she tried the rope with one delicate foot, to see that it was sufficiently taut.

It shook a trifle, and, seeing this, Monsieur Leek turned a small crank of a machine attached to a neighboring tree, and the rope immediately became like a rod of iron. Then with a piquant nod to all, Mlle. Ma Belle grasped her pole, and glided out upon the cable, with the precision and ease of a piece of mechanism.

With breathless interest the crowd watched, scarcely daring to stir in their tracks lest it should be the means of disconcerting that fair vision above them, and cause her to lose her balance.

But they need not have feared.

She stepped carefully along without much studied effort, and reached a spot directly over the gulch, amid thundering cheers. Here she stopped, and, motioning for those below to clear away, she dropped her balance-pole into the creek, after which she detached a bow and arrow from her belt, and resumed a standing position on the rope.

It was a wonderful sight to see her standing there in mid-air, perfectly balanced, and taking the matter quite as coolly as though she was not a hundred feet above *terra firma*. It was more than wonderful, and the crowd cheered and applauded accordingly.

There she stood, smiling her thanks; then, after the audience once more became hushed, she cast a single glance at M. Leek, who stood with a small cage-trap in his hand on the eastern cliff. The glance was the signal that freed the bird, and the next instant a white pigeon flew out upon the air, directly over Ma Belle. She waited calmly until the beautiful creature was some distance away, when she suddenly raised her bow and sent an arrow whirling westward.

Wonder of wonders! After several strange, half-circular movements, the arrow overtook the bird, buried itself in the feathery body, and both dropped into the gulch bottom. And the crowd gave one awful yell. But it was not a yell of applause, but, on the contrary, of horror.

Ma Belle had in the act lost her balance, and would have gone tumbling over into the gulf of space had not she made a wild grasp and clutched the rope as she fell.

She was hanging to it, desperately now, with one hand, and that her left, for in falling she had grasped the rope with her right hand, and wrenched the arm out of joint. It was a critical, a fearful moment.

"My child! my Ma Belle!" shrieked M. Leek, running to and fro, and almost frantic. "She will be killed! Ma Belle, my poor child—save her!"

No one answered. All were too horrified to speak or act. All but one.

Wildcat Bob threw off his overshirt, and ran boldly on the rope; soon he got dizzy, and was forced to accomplish the remainder of the distance hand over hand.

On he went, bravely and steadily. And Ma Belle clung to her hold, desperately determined not to let go.

At last the prize-fighter reached her, and assisted her back to her feet on the rope.

But, great heavens! look. A figure, with a piercing scream, dashes up to the cliff on the eastern side, and with a mighty stroke of a gleaming knife cuts the rope in twain! And that figure is—Kitty Aymer!

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLOOD-HOUNDS—A HORROR OF HORRORS.

"He is dead!" said old Bill Wood as he raised the head of Thomas Lamonte upon his knee, and wiped away the blood. "Poor feller; it's a gol-durned hard time uv it he's had, knockin' erbout ther world, tho' I hadn't ther buzz of an idear who he was 'tel a minnit ago, blarst me if I had. But I begin ter see now, or I kinder think I do. Hum, yes," and the old man nodded his head thoughtfully, as he gazed sorrowfully into the white haggard face of the corpse.

He had said all this in a slow, half-unconscious way, as if he knew not that Iris was listening eagerly.

"Father!"

She came forward, and laid one hand on the shaggy locks of hair that covered his head, and when he glanced up in a startled way, he met her gaze of piteous inquiry and doubt.

"Father, who am I?"

Four words from her sweet lips; four words uttered in a pleading, pitiful tone; four words that had worlds of meaning in them.

He did not answer for several moments. He could not answer as he should have done, and yet he must make some reply.

"Who ar' ye?" he repeated, as if he were astonished at the question. "Waal, now, that ar' a queer axin'. Who d'ye s'pose ye be 'cept Iris Wood?"

"I don't know," was the girl's quick answer, "but I want to and must know. I am some one else, for this stranger's words and actions implied as much. You know and you told him, and now you must tell me the same."

"My gal, ye surprise me. W'at d'ye want me to tell, I'd like to kno'?"

"The truth!" she responded, kneeling beside him. "First, tell me, are you really, truly my father?"

The old man bowed his head in his horny hands a moment, and remained silent. When he looked up a tear stood in either eye.

"No, child," he answered, huskily; "I'll tell ye the truth as far's I can. I am *not* your father; but, gal, ye won't like me none ther less—?"

"No! no!" cried Iris, impetuously, throwing her arms about his neck, and kissing him. "You have been good, kind, and generous to me, and I shall love you the same."

"God be praised," said the old miller, shedding tears of gratitude; "those words are like aim to my old heart, child, and I thank ye!"

Iris waited for him to speak again, but he did not. His head was dropped upon his breast, and he seemed entirely oblivious of other presence.

At last she touched him upon the shoulder, and said:

"You have said you were not my father; then, who am I? Who were my parents? Oh! do tell me."

"I can't!" replied the miller, rising abruptly, and pushing her back. "I've told ye all I can, at present. Some other time I may tell you more. But, not now, so don't bother me."

Picking up the sack that Lamonte had deposed

ited on the floor, he poured the contents on the floor before him, and knelt to examine the treasure.

As the miner said, there were exactly twenty-three nuggets of gold—all pure and shining. Then, there was a roll of note-paper bound with red tape, and this Wood hastily transferred to his own pocket.

Besides this there was nothing save a gold watch and a pistol. The watch Iris picked up, and examined, critically. It was of American manufacture, and exquisitely wrought. On one of the inner cases was engraved the inscription: "Thomas to Myra."

"Were Thomas and Myra my parents?" demanded the girl, turning quickly to Bill Wood—"were they?"

"Yes; thar, now, don't ask me no more."

"But, I will, though," she replied, firmly. "What is in the papers you are so anxious to keep away from your daughter's eyes, sir?"

"I don't kno', so dry up," he growled, and leaving the gold on the floor, he rose to his feet and hurried from the shanty.

After he had gone Iris gathered it up in her apron, and handled it over carefully.

She had never seen as much all in one collection before, and it appeared to her like some wild dream more than reality.

Twenty-three thousand dollars!

It seemed so like a fabulous amount that it could not be true.

Poor little fair-faced Iris. She had never aspired to such wealth—scarcely ever dreamed that as much money existed in the wide, wide world.

Now, she was the owner of part of this wonderful legacy; who would claim the remaining half? Did Bill Wood know where to find the other heir? Yes, he must know all, for he had the papers; and beside, he seemed to recognize the man as some one he had seen before. He, then, possessed the secret of the whole mysterious affair. For a long time Iris sat and wondered over the matter, her pretty chin resting between a pair of soft white hands, and her eyes bent upon the floor, where lay the corpse of Thomas Lamonte, the man of mystery.

Presently a figure darkened the doorway of the humble home.

Not the form of old Bill Wood, but the person of a creature of the opposite sex, so horribly grotesque, wild and hideous, that Iris involuntarily uttered a scream of terror and sprung to her feet.

It was a woman—there was no denying that; a woman with a face hard to picture, with its seams and furrows and bright yellow skin; its horrible mouthful of fangs; its wild tangled gray hair, and eyes like a burning fire; a woman, yet so awfully terrible and repulsive as to be an object of affright. She was clad in ragged and soiled garments, wore nothing of covering on her head, and carried in the grasp of her claw-like hands a stout oaken staff, on which she half leaned for support.

As Iris uttered a terrified scream and sprung to her feet, a low peculiar laugh broke from the old woman's lips:

"Ha! ha! ha! don't be afraid, young lady—don't be afraid of me, for I will not hurt you. I am simply a harmless old fool; that's all, my ducky, that's all; so don't be skeered at me. I just come in for a moment to see a dead man—ah! there he is, now, poor fellow. How lucky he is to get to heaven, first. Once, we told each other that we'd never part, but foul enemies came between us, and tore our hearts asunder. That was long ago, deary, long, long ago, before they put me in the big mad-house. Ugh! that was a terrible place, where shrieks, groans, curses and demoniac howls constantly made the foul air musical. I learned to shriek, there,—learned to shriek as loud as any of them, when they would try to put the straight-jacket on me. Ha! ha! and I'd curse, and fight, too, but that's all the good it done. The keepers were all devils, and could conquer demons. Hum, ho! yes, they were very devils, but I eluded them, and like a fox-hound smelt my way from the accursed land, out here. And I saw him, too; him who made me what I am, curses go with him! Poor Thomas; he died without knowing who fired the pistol-shot that ushered him into eternity, before his God and master. Poor, poor silent Thomas."

She knelt beside the outstretched form and gazed long and searchingly into the face that was calm in death.

Long and eagerly did she gaze there; then, with a great sigh she rose to her feet. Iris had been eying her half in terror, but she now advanced and spoke:

"Was the dead man ever aught to you, ma'am?" she asked, pointing to the corpse of Thomas Lamonte. "Did you know him in former days?"

The old woman nodded slowly, and tears stood in her wild eyes as she replied:

"Yes, deary; I knew him, once, but it was long, long ago. He came to me and wooed and won me, but we were separated, and I have never met him since. Poor Thomas; he died without knowing my innocence, and even knew not whose hand it was that gave him his death-blow. Ha! ha! ha!"

With a startling scream of laughter the stranger turned and fled out through a rear-door, and disappeared within the depths of a thicket.

She was scarcely out of the rear-door when old Bill Wood came bounding in at the front.

"Who was heer?" he demanded, his excitement getting the better of him. "I see'd sum one cum in heer—who war it, gal?"

"An old woman, sir," replied Iris, pointing toward the rear-door. "She went out through there."

"What'd she want in heer?"

"I don't know, unless it was to see this corpse. She seemed to recognize Mr. Lamonte as some one she had previously known."

"No doubt, no doubt," muttered the miller with a sigh. "It must hev bin her, then, true enuff, though who'd 'a' thought o' her comin' out heer? Lordy! thar'll be hot times soon, I reckon."

The day passed away drowsily.

The body of Lamonte was laid upon a couch in the next room, where it was to remain until sunset, when the miller intended to bury it, and Iris went about her work, her thoughts varying alternately from her lover, as she secretly called the man she had met in Denver, to Wild Carlos; and from the corpse in the adjoining room to the horrible old woman with the awful fangs.

Why was it that her mind seemed to connect them all together? In no way could she solve the problem.

Wood was silent and gloomy all the day. Something seemed weighing heavily on his mind, and he was as ill at ease "as a fish out of water," as Iris laughingly remarked.

By noon he had finished his fifth pipe, and he arose from the doorstep, where he was sitting, with a long-drawn sigh.

"Iris," he said, looking up and down the gulch, and then turning his troubled face toward her, "where's the gold?"

"The gold? Why, I hid it in the bottom of my trunk."

"Humph. Thet won't do, gal, thet won't do. Better let me take it and bury it for you, whar't'll be safe."

"Where it will be safe? Then, don't you think it will be safe in the bottom of the trunk?"

"No, I don't. Le'me tell ye, gal, I'm afeerd thar's devilment a-brewin', or else I've lost my guess. Thar was a feller sneakin' about the mill a leetle while ago, an' I s'pect he's found out sumthin' about the gold."

"Oh! no, it cannot be!"

"Yes, et can. Thar's them as can smell out gold wi'out ther least disconveynence, and I jedge the cuss I see'd war one o' them 'ar kind. So, as no one kin tell w'at may happen, I'd best bury the pesky stuff whar ye kin git it at sum future time. I'll also put ther papers wi' et, an' w'en ye go fer ther gold ye can find out who ye be."

"And when will that be?"

"Not afore I peg out, gal. Out o' respect fer your old man ye must promise not to go nigh the cache 'til I'm jigged out, an' I opine 'twon't be long off, nuther, fer I've got a presentation that this old bunch o' humanity won't 'ang together much longer. D'ye promise, gal?"

"Yes, I promise," replied Iris, gravely.

"Good. Now, then, git me the gold, an' I'll see thet it is cached right off."

She went into the adjoining room and soon returned with the sack of precious metal, which she gave to him, and he in turn left the shanty, going off toward the mill.

He was absent for an hour, and when he returned there was a grim smile of triumph on his face.

"I guess they won't find thet wealth fer awhile," he said, seating himself in his favorite chimney-corner, and lighting his pipe. "It'll take a man who kin see thru mountings ter discover et, unless he hed ther key."

"Indeed. Then you must have buried it very deep?"

"Rec'on so; leastways no one ken't find it 'les I tell 'em w'ar 'tis."

"Then you had better tell me, so that I will know where to look for it."

"Humph! guess I won't tell ye jes' yit, 'till thet feller gits thru peekin' in at thet windy, thar behind ye."

Iris glanced around with a startled cry, just in time to see a grim, scarred face disappear below the window-ledge. Somebody had been spying on them!

With a wonderful presence of mind, she seized a kettle of boiling water from the fireplace, and hurled it with all her might through the open casement. She heard it strike, and a fearful scream of pain followed by a volley of terrible oaths and curses; but ere she could spring to the door, the sneaking intruder had escaped.

"It takes a gal to fix 'em!" laughed old Bill, as Iris, rosy with excitement, re-entered the kitchen. "Thet war the purtiest pot-slatin' I ever see'd did in the hull course o' my life."

"It seems as if danger and strange events are to be a chief characteristic of to-day," replied Iris, going back to her work. "Somehow I feel a presentiment that something awful is about to happen."

"Wai, may be thar is. Thar's no tellin' ene

minnit w'at'll happen ther next, now-a-days, as I often held out. I've hed a presentation o' sumthin' o' ther kind, mysel'."

Half an hour later Iris had occasion to go to the spring for a pail of fresh water. The spring in question bubbled from the rocks, a short distance up the gulch, and was surrounded by a growth of young alders. The water was very clear and pure, and, in fact, was the only water fit to drink in that neighborhood.

While she was filling the vessel, Iris heard a soft footstep behind her, and wheeling about, came face to face with Wild Carlos.

"Pardon, lady," he said, smiling and doffing his sombrero, "though I did not intrude here intentionally. Being thirsty, and hearing the water's music this way, I sought this spring to quench my thirst."

"You do not intrude, at all," replied Iris, pleasantly. "You come for water, sir, and water shall you have."

She allowed the dipper she had brought along to run full of the sparkling fluid, and handed it to him with a gay little laugh.

"Drink, sir knight," she said, and he accepted the dipper and drank, deeply.

"Thanks, fair lady. That draught was doubly refreshing and pure, since it came from your hands."

"Indeed. I did not know my hands possessed so magic an influence," she retorted, blushing beneath his ardent gaze. "You flatter those poor little hands of mine, sir."

"Nay, lady, I do not. No amount of words of praise to thy beauteous self could justly be termed flattery, since you are the very queen of all that is beautiful. Any man, with you his bride, might well consider himself the winner of a prize more valuable than a whole world's wealth?"

"Oh! dear, what absurdity!" laughed Iris, who, for all, was secretly pleased with this gallant highwayman and his smooth, easy manners. "You, I suppose, must be one of that class I have read of in stories—woman-killers! for I always imagined they were addicted to flattery."

"There you mistake, senorita, I am not the man to flatter any one. When I express my opinion of a person, it is just as their appearance happens to strike me. You are certainly a queen among women, and the man who fails to fall dead in love with you at first sight, is but half a man."

Iris turned her face away to hide her blushes and pretty confusion, and all the while she wondered why she was standing here in this strange man's presence, listening to the music of his deep, rich voice, and drinking in his words of admiration with a fastly beating heart.

Was he casting a spell of enchantment around her? If so, she must break that spell, and she summoned up all her womanly power to do it.

"You should not speak so to me!" she exclaimed, in a cold, half-haughty tone. "You forget that it is ungentlemanly."

"It is not ungentlemanly," he declared, taking a step nearer. "Is it wrong for man to love, my dear lady? Certainly not. This is a free world, and if he is willing to take his chances of success or failure, a man has a right to tell his love to the object of his choice, whoever she may be!"

"I shall not dispute with you, sir," replied Iris, taking up the pail of water, "nor can I tarry to listen to you. Therefore, you will have to excuse me."

She was moving away, when he sprang quickly forward and took the pail from her hand.

"At least allow me to carry this," he said, in a passionate tone. "Do not refuse me this trifling favor."

"Oh! no! no, sir!" cried Iris, becoming terrified. "You must not go with me, indeed. If papa should see me in your company he would be very angry."

"True," said Carlos De Monterey, a trifle bitterly, as he set the pail upon the ground. "I had almost forgotten that I am outlawed from my own race. Pardon my intrusion, lady, and forgive me for what I have said to you."

And turning quickly, the handsome outlaw disappeared in the alder thicket.

Iris retraced her steps to the humble shanty she called home, her heart beating more rapidly than it ever beat before, and her face glowing rosy red.

What did it mean? Was she really in love with this gallant robber, whose manners were gentlemanly and courteous, and whose words were full of admiration and respect? Who can tell?

A woman's heart is so difficult to analyze, that one can not fathom its caprices.

Be it as it may, one thing is certain—Iris thought of that interview, with a pleased expression in her blue eyes, for the remainder of the eventful day.

A short time before sunset old Bill dug a grave on the shore of the pond, and went after the body of Thomas Lamonte.

Imagine the amazement of both himself and Iris, when, on entering the room where the body had been left, they discovered that it had mysteriously disappeared.

The apartment and the rest of the shanty

were hurriedly searched, but nothing of the remains of Thomas Lamonte could be found.

Completely mystified, they were finally compelled to give up, and regard the strange occurrence in whatever light they could.

"It's cl'ar beyand my comprehenshun, gal," was all the old miller could say. "Thar's no use frettin' over it, tho', I'm sure."

Just at dusk he was about to start off in search of the family cow, when Iris called him back.

"Let me go and hunt up Boss," she said, eagerly. "It is so lonesome here, that I'd just like a run in the open air."

"As ye like, pet. Yer legs ar' younger'n mine, ter be sure, and p'arps ye kin' hunt up the critter sooner than I c'u'd. So get a-goin', now, an' hustle the brindle in, in a hurry."

Seizing her hat, Iris gladly set forth, and was soon lost from view up the gulch bottom.

Thicker and thicker the shadows of night settled over the desolate scene, and old Bill Wood sat in the front doorway of his shanty, anxiously awaiting Iris' return.

An hour, two hours passed, and still she came not.

By this time the old miller was thoroughly alarmed, and was about to rise and go in search of her, when he was suddenly seized by some one from within the shanty, borne back to the floor, and in a twinkling was securely bound, gagged and blindfolded. Then strong arms raised him, and bore him out into the open air.

Soon he heard boards shake beneath the feet of those who were carrying him, and he came to the conclusion that his captors had borne him into the saw-mill. Here he was dropped to the floor, and he heard many voices about him. Not long was he left lying, however, for powerful hands again raised him, and the bandage was removed from his eyes, while a stern, gruff voice exclaimed:

"Bill Wood, look around you!"

He did look, and what he saw made his face grow white with terror.

He was standing on the car originally intended to bear logs into the biting teeth of a large circular saw. All around him stood white draped figures, with revolvers leveled at his breast, to prevent his escape.

The circular saw was in full motion, making hundreds of revolutions per minute, and another white figure stood with a hand upon the lever that would force the car forward. By his side stood another like figure, although the latter was a very giant in size, while the former was almost dwarfish. As the old miller gazed around him, he shuddered at the forbidding spectacle, and waited for some one to speak. The man of giant size, and apparently the leader of the gang, volunteered to begin the conversation.

"Bill Wood, ye've gazed around ye an' beheld ther notorious Bloodhounds of the Border, whose deeds hev no equality in all ther annals o' criminal ruffianism. Our name stands distinkt frum inferior competitors, an' we rejoice thereat. Our visit ter ye, is to collect our rightful revenues from ye—twenty-three golden nuggets thet ye hev hid sum'war in the locality. Jes's soon as ye tell us whar to find them same, ye'll be sot free, slick as a whistle. We giv ye ten minnits ter speak up, in. Ef ye refuse we'll interdooce ye to this saw!"

At this juncture the gag was slipped from the old man's mouth, and he was enabled to breathe freer.

"I will not tell ye a darned word, so go on with your sawing, ef thet's what yer up to," he growled, angrily.

At a motion from the giant the old man was pinioned to a log that lay upon the car, so that in splitting the log the lightning fury of the humming saw would likewise go through the body of the helpless captive.

"Will ye tell?" demanded the Bloodhound chief, advancing so that he could watch the working of the white upturned face. "Will ye save your life?" No reply!

Two moments dragged away.

"How is it, now? Think more of thet gold than ye like to admit, eh?"

"I think so much of et that ye'll never git fat off o' et, cuss ye!" was the unhesitating answer.

"That so? Wal, ye see, ef ye can stan' bein' sawed up inter slabs, we kin' let the gold slide. Besides, thar's a way ter git et, even ef ye sticker out. Thet gal o' yourn knows whar't is."

"No, she hasn't ther leest idee whar I hev concealed it!"

"Bosh! I kno' better nor thet. Ye can't cum none o' yer shernannigan over this double-spurred pullet; not much!"

A long, painful silence.

"Seven minnits gone," declared the giant, with a horrible leer. "Better hurry, ole boss, fer yer time 's gettin' short."

"Short it ar' then. Once an' fer all, I will never giv ye that gold."

A dead silence, save what little noise is occasioned by the buzzing of the saw, and the roaring and splashing of the water as the great wheel went around and around.

"Eight minnits. Will ye tell?"

No response from the prisoner.

"Nine minnits. Last chance. Speak now or never, ef ye wish ter save yer life, old man!"

But old Bill Wood spoke not.

"Ten! time's up. Jake Carrigan, shuv hard on thet lever!"

The order was instantly obeyed, and the car with its load of life sped forward and was received by the whirling saw—received and sawn in twain! A horror of horrors, truly.

CHAPTER XIII.

SAVED BY A MIRACLE—ENTRAPPED.

Yes, the taut rope was cut in twain, near its connection with the windlass, and Kitty Aymer stood there upon the cliff with glaring eyes and knife in hand, ready to fight anyone who should say aught against her or offer to molest her for her terrible crime.

Down—down went the rope into the yawning gulf of space, with its freight of human lives. Loud yells of horror and indignation went up from the audience below, but even these tokens of sympathy availed the victims of so malicious an outrage, nothing.

Wildcat Bob was now clinging to the rope with his right hand, while his left arm was clasped around the waist of the white-faced Ma Belle.

Down—down—down, they went with awful velocity toward the bottom of the crowded gulch. Should the rope not be long enough to touch the bottom, they were doomed to be dashed against the rocks on the opposite side.

The Wildcat took in everything at a glance, and saw that the chances for salvation were few and far between.

If he could keep them off the wall by thrusting forth his feet, he might possibly prevent their being dashed into jelly; but a glance convinced him that he could not sufficiently break the shock to insure their safety. Below him lay the glistening waters of the creek, and they seemed smiling up a welcome to him. Were they deep enough to break his fall from high mid-air?

He could but try, at least, and with a silent prayer to his God for mercy, he let go the rope, and, with Ma Belle clasped in his arms, went spinning swiftly downward.

Down, down, and two seconds later they disappeared beneath the surface of Pompeii's creek.

Then the crowd gave an awful yell of horror, and rushed forward in a mass, expecting to find the crushed and mangled bodies of the twain floating before their eyes.

But in this they were mistaken. Nothing was to be seen of them in the clear, transparent waters. They had disappeared!

Suddenly one old miner, who had "rocked" the "cradle" since the first gold-fever broke out, stepped forward.

"I'll tell ye w'at's ther row," he said, nodding his head knowingly. "Thar ar' an old water-filled shaft hereabouts sum'ars, an' my opinion ar' thet ther boy an' gal's gone down thet identical shaft!"

"Good God!" cried Mr. Leek and Colonel Tupper, as at this juncture they rushed up, having descended from the cliff. "Are they killed?"

"Thet's hard tellin'," replied Joe Grimes, the veteran. "More'n like's not they're fifteen thousand feet below Terrence Firma about this time."

"Yes; here's the mouth o' the shaft," cried one of the miners, who had waded into the creek. "I can feel the edge o' et wi' my feet."

"And by the ashes o' Absalom, heer comes ther party we're lookin' fer," shouted old Joe, as there was a great bubbling and seething of the water, and a moment later head and shoulders of the Boss Bruiser came above the surface.

A deafening cheer went up from the crowd, and a score of ready hands reached forth to aid the hero ashore. With him came the fair Ma Belle; but, unlike her noble preserver, she was quite insensible.

"Make way! git out! make room!" yelled Colonel Tupper, swinging his heavy cane right and left, without regard as to whose skull he cracked. "Git, I tell ye, an' let ther breeze git a dab at ther gal. She's gon' fainted, an' must hev room, I tell ye."

Thus appealed to the spectators shrunk back, and Ma Belle was laid upon a patch of green grass, and water dashed into her face.

"I do not think she received any bruise or wound to produce insensibility," said Wildcat Bob, as he gently bathed the pale, fair brow of the maiden. "That fall was enough to frighten the wits out of anybody though, and I came within one of getting scared too. Heavens! I would not take another such a tumble for any amount of money. When I went down that shaft I thought sure I shouldn't stop short of China."

"Lucky thet hoel war thar," grunted old Joe Grimes; "fer ef et hadn't been thar, we'd 'a' had a funeral or two to attend, I kin safely assure ye. How d'ye feel, young man?"

"I?" said Wildcat Bob, with a light laugh. "Oh! I'm kickin' yet. Leave me alone to come out of a scrape all hunki dori. I've been in a good many tough places, and thus far I've come out A, Number One."

Ma Belle now gave signs of returning consciousness, and a few moments later opened her eyes.

"Oh! my child! my Ma Belle!" cried M. Leek in an ecstasy of joy, as he knelt at her side. "I am so glad that you still live."

The maiden made an attempt to speak, but could only gasp.

"Stand back, and give her air," commanded Wildcat Bob, and there was a light in his eye that told them it would be dangerous to disobey. Accordingly the miners moved away, and the fresh air that swept down the gulch soon brought the color back to Ma Belle's cheeks.

After a short consultation with M. Leek, Colonel Tupper clambered to the summit of a neighboring stump, and flourished his arms promiscuously to attract attention.

"Feller-citizens!" he began, in tones of a Stentor, "I arise thusly before you to maken' nouncement that ther exercises of this afternoon will henceforth be discontinued until ter-morrer afternoon at three P.M., when ther graceful an' gazelle-like Madonner o' the tight rope will re-appear to delite yer fastidyus optics, as the ambles an' frisks across the marvelous Gulf o' Space on a thre'd o' spool-cotton. Those who are in favor of re-witnessing the wonderus performances o' the Ma'mselle will make their wishes manifest by saying 'I.'"

"I," "I," "I," came from a hundred throats in the same breath.

"Contrary, no," said the colonel.

One man only objected, and he was Wildcat Bob.

"Very decidedly, no!" he exclaimed.

"The committee overrules the objection!" declared Tupper, pompously.

"Feller-citizens, I have ther honor to announce that Mlle. Ma Belle will appear. Now, then, git back to yer biz."

As there was nothing to remain for, the vast audience accordingly turned their faces toward the settlement, and strode away.

Only four persons remained behind. They were M. Leek and Ma Belle, and Colonel Tupper and Wildcat Bob.

"Do I understand it that you will again imperil the life of this young lady on that rope, sir?" demanded the young bruiser, sternly, as he eyed Mons. Leek, narrowly.

"My child will cross the gulch, or she will die in the attempt," was the quick, angry reply, and the Frenchman bit his lip savagely. "She is not afraid to make another trial!"

"For the simple reason that she dare not be afraid, you old scoundrel. Did you not intimidate her, constantly, she would not set a foot upon the accursed rope that to-day nearly caused her destruction."

"Ha! how know you this?"

"She just told me as much, and I am enough of a judge of character to know she has not told me falsely."

"Then, by the crown, I'll chastise you, girl, for your boldness. Come with me!"

Ma Belle grew very white, for the evil glare in the Frenchman's eyes was horrible to see. Turning toward Wildcat Bob, she gave him an imploring glance.

"Oh! sir, do not let him hurt me!" she cried, tears standing in her eyes. "He will take me to his tent and whip me—oh! so hard."

"No, he will do nothing of the kind, young lady," replied the young pugilist coolly, as he put his form between her and M. Leek. "I'll teach him a lesson if he dares to give me three words of lip. Now, you infamous old hypocrite, get out of this just about as lively as you can, if you value your bones. Go, I say, or as sure's there is virtue in my moccasins, I'll boot you clean to Denver. Come, get a-going!"

"M-m-my boy!" stammeringly interposed Colonel Tupper, soothingly—

But the other interrupted him with a light laugh.

"Dry up, colonel. This is none of your pudding, so keep your fingers out of it. I'll teach this old reprobate that the arms and fists, the feet and legs, and even the mouth of the Wildcat are ever ready to war against the wretch who makes war with women. A woman, in my estimation, is not intended as the recipient of blows and curses, and here's what is ready to strike for them, any time."

"You are a most disgusting brag," sneered M. Leek, not offering to retreat. "Give me up the girl, and allow me to return to my tent."

"No, I will not, you cur. Colonel, I now place this young lady on your hospitality, and in under your care, 'til I get through with this dirty villain. Now, you Frenchman, get up and dust!"

M. Leek glanced his enemy over, from head to foot, and a greenish-glitter entered his evil eyes.

"I'll fight first!" he hissed, and he whipped a pistol from his hip-pocket.

But before he could use it, one of the Boss Bruiser's fists reached him squarely between the eyes, and he tumbled over into the creek.

"Let him lay there," said Bob, as he perceived his face was above water. "It will cool off his ardor, and do him good. Now, young lady, accept my arm, and I will conduct you to a place of safety, where you will not again be molested."

Ma Belle readily consented, and the two strolled away toward Pompeii, the colonel bringing up the rear.

"Have you a spare room, colonel?" asked the young man, glancing back, as they neared the "Spread Eagle" saloon. "I wish to provide this young lady with the best accommodations I can, until I learn her history, and am able to place her in a better institution than the saloon."

"You are darned complimentary on my ranch," growled the worthy proprietor of the "Spread Eagle." "Ef ye warn't bigger'n I, I'd be tempted to trounce ye. Howsumever, I'll forego that undertaking until a better opportunity arrives."

"No, I hain't got no room, 'less et ar' my office in back of the bar. I'll surrender thet up fer ther cash."

"Very well. Go ahead and clear it out, and I will pay you for it."

Accordingly the colonel hurried on ahead, and the couple slowly followed in his wake.

"You are very kind to me, sir," said Ma Belle, with a grateful glance, "and I do not know how I can ever repay you. You have saved me from death, and the merciless blows of Jules Leek, and deserve a greater reward than I shall ever be able to give you."

"I do not do things like this for the sake of reward, lady," was the grave reply. "Surely, I have done nothing more than any gentleman would crave the chance to do. Had I left you in the power of that man, I should have cursed myself for the heartless action afterward. But, tell me—what relation does he bear to you, miss?"

"None at all, sir. He is simply my guardian, and that is all. But he has been a very cruel guardian to me. If it had not been for his power over me, I would have fled from him long ago, and put the seas between us."

"You belong in a foreign country, then?"

"No, but I have a sister living in England, sir. My native State is Florida, from where we came, when my guardian took it into his head to visit the gold regions."

"How is it that you are such an adept on the tight-rope? Few circus performers can equal you."

"I learned to walk the rope, sir, with a pistol pointed at my head. My guardian is a retired gymnast of an eastern show, and he taught me to walk, by whipping me every time I lost my balance."

"The scoundrel! I am sorry I did not finish him up, while I was about it. But, come. Here is the saloon, and there is the colonel, who will show you to a room where you can remain in privacy. Had you other wardrobe?"

"Oh! yes, sir. It is in the tent on the cliff, and I shall need it so much."

"Very well. I will get it for you then. Now, adieu for the present."

"Good-day. You will come to see me?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," and then, after a short hand-pressure, they parted, Ma Belle being shown by the obsequious colonel into her new quarters in the rear of the bar, which had been hastily prepared for her exclusive use.

During the time between that and evening, Wildcat Bob retraced his steps to the tent of Leek, and procured his fair charge's wardrobe, which was limited to a valise and a basket of old dresses. These were duly transferred to the maiden's room, and she was made as comfortable as circumstances would permit.

Night fell over Pompeii's gulch, dark and cloudy, and the evening stage arrived, loaded down with new-comers.

In consequence of a scarcity of fighting material, the colonel was forced to postpone the prize-contest.

No one seemed to have any desire to put himself up as a target for the Boss Bruiser's terrible blows, and therefore, no battle occurred.

Among the new arrivals were several strange characters, at once noticeable.

Long-bearded men from the States, rough, grizzly veterans from California, and hunters, trappers, and mountain-men of the northwest, were grouped here and there, some "lubricating" at the bar, and others looking on, and admiring the pretty waiter-girls as they dealt out the fiery bug-juice.

The colonel was behind the bar, looking "as big as life and twice as natural," to use an old expression, and his bows and smiles were something wonderful to behold.

As long as there was plenty of cash rolling across the bench into his capacious pockets, and very little of the highly prized aforesaid juice going out, accordingly, the ex-officer was in his glory.

During the evening Wildcat Bob took the opportunity to slip into Ma Belle's apartment and inquire after her health. He was warmly received by the impulsive young maiden, and could have spent a very agreeable hour with her, had not propriety served to hasten an early good-night.

After leaving her, he wandered aimlessly about the bar-room, studying the faces of those around him, and taking an observation of all that was going on. The gaming-tables were crowded, and the bankers and the colonel were generally reaping a rich harvest from those "green 'uns" that ventured their money with the vain hope of having success.

About nine o'clock in the evening, Wildcat

Bob was tapped on the shoulder by a miner, whom he had seen on several occasions, and accosted:

"Be you the snoozer they call Wildcat Bob?" was the question put, as the speaker shifted uneasily from one foot to the other, "'ca'se ef you be, I've got a message fer you."

"A message for me?"

"Exactly, pervidin' you're the fellar I sed—Mr. Wildcat Bob."

"What is the message?"

"Fust, tell me, ar' ye the snoozer thet I am lookin' for?"

"Yes. Go on—what message have you for me, I should like to know?"

The miner lowered his tone a trifle.

"Thar's a she-male outside, thet wants ter see ye. She giv' me a quarter to tell you as how she war' ther gal o' a feller named Robert Beecher, or as he war' known here, John Cameron, an' thet he hed left a de'th confession w'ich consarned you; so she wants ter interview ye."

Wildcat Bob received the news with considerable emotion.

"Where is this girl?" he demanded, pacing to and fro—"where is she?"

"Up the gulch, a bit, hid in the bushes, an' afeard to cum up heer to the ranch, lest the fellers shed see her. Modest, ain't she? But, cum along, an' I'll conduct ye to her, in a jerk o' a lamb's tail."

Not knowing what else to do under the circumstances, the young man followed his guide, and the two left the saloon and walked swiftly up the gulch. For about ten minutes they kept on, and were half a mile distant from the saloon, when the miner suddenly halted and presented a cocked revolver at the pugilist's head.

"Silence!" he hissed, and at the same instant a female figure glided out before them and exclaimed:

"Wildcat Bob, you are my prisoner!"

The woman was Kitty Aymer!

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE POWER OF THE BLOODHOUNDS—AN UNEXPECTED RESCUE.

Yes, the woman was Kitty Aymer, and she, too, held a cocked revolver in her hand, the muzzle of which was turned directly at the bruiser's heart.

"Wildcat Bob, you are my prisoner," she repeated, giving extra emphasis to the word "my."

"It looks somewhat that way, I must admit," replied the young pugilist, with a cool laugh. "But, pray, how am I indebted to you for this rather forcible mode of meeting?"

"You mean, why do I see fit to take you a captive, sir?"

"Well, yes. I do not recognize you as any one whom I have hitherto counted on the enemy list."

"No, probably not. I have but recently become your enemy. I am the wife of a man whom I married as John Cameron, but whom I have since learned went under the name of Robert Beecher or Bancroft, I know not which. He was an enemy of yours, and when he died, a few days ago, he made me swear to work against you, and I took a solemn oath to do so!"

"What! is Robert Beecher surely dead, then?" cried Wildcat Bob, excitedly.

"John Cameron was killed in a brawl at the Heifer Shebang, but I do not know whether his name was Bancroft or Beecher, for a certainty. I sent this companion of mine to you, believing that you were the latter, as I found out by some papers on my husband's body, that you were either one or the other."

"My name is Bancroft—Robert T. Bancroft," replied the pugilist, sternly, "yet I am constantly being dogged by a passel of army fools who persist in declaring me to be Robert Beecher."

"Indeed! Well, I have no time to parley with you about that. This gentleman with the cocked revolver will see you safely out of town and into the hands of enemies who will be pretty sure to make short work of you. Further than that I have nothing to say, except that my failure to kill you this afternoon will be succeeded by an early end to your career when the Bloodhounds get hold of you. Now, Reuben, do your work well, for I must be off."

And so saying, the young woman nodded to Wildcat Bob, restored her weapon to her pocket, and turned away. In a moment she had vanished in the gloom, having gone in the direction of the settlement.

"Wal," said the man Reuben, after she had disappeared from view, "git a-goin', my fine feller, ef ye're a-going ter hitch traces along wi' me, fer we've another good ten mile to walk ere we git to our stoppin' place."

"Put down your pistol," replied the Wildcat, watching his captor sharply. "I don't relish the taste of cold lead, so keep the muzzle turned the other way, if you please."

"But, I don't please," laughed the other, still keeping the shining barrel on a level with the pugilist's breast. "My orders ar' ter fetch ye to camp, an' fetch ye I'm goin' to; ef 'tain't alive, it'll be dead, you heer me."

"What if I refuse to go?"

"Then, I'll perforate you wi' pills thet don't

digest so very good. Come, now, I'm bizness clean ter ther eye-teeth. Move along ahead, thar, right smart."

"S'posin' I won't move worth a cent?"

"Then, by ther luvly roses o' last summer, I'll baste ye wi' the toe end o' my boot. Cum! cum! are ye startin'?"

"What if I refuse to start?" retorted the pugilist in the same provoking manner. "Haven't seen me start yet, have you, sir?"

"Darn my socks, but yer the coclest 'un I ever see'd. I say, you, now, 'thout enny more foolin', are ye goin' to peg?"

"S'posin' I won't peg?"

The miner uttered a savage curse and pulled back the lock of his weapon to full cock.

"Now, git!" he said, hoarsely, "or ye kin spit terbacker juice all over me ef I don't giv' ye a blizzard."

"You bet," was the laconic reply. "Which way shall I pedestrianize?"

"Straight ahead, thar, up thet path that leads out o' the gulch, then due northeast, an', mind ye, don't try no skeddaddum games on me, ef ye don't want'er git totally riddilated wi' hard purgatory pellets. Go 'long like a peaceable snoozer, an' no harm 'll cum to ye at my hands."

"Indeed! You are kind; but s'posin' I don't go along for a step?"

Reuben uttered another curse, and in his rage pulled the trigger of his revolver. The weapon exploded with a loud report, and a bullet tore through the fleshy part of the Wildcat's arm. But though the wound proved painful, not a move of the muscles of the pugilist was noticeable. He stood like a statue there before his savage captor, a sarcastic smile hovering about his firm-set lips.

"A poor shot, that," he said, with just the least bit of contempt in his tone. "You had better go and practice at the side of some neighboring hill; you might possibly hit *that*, though I'd hate to risk much money on it. Now, have you got through, for if you have, lead the way to your camp, as I am anxious to see these notorious Bloodhounds there is so much talk about."

"Go ahead yerself," growled Reuben, recocking his pistol, "an' shet up. I won't miss you, next time, bet yer boots. This pill-box ar' good fer five plugs, yit."

Without any further palaver, Wildcat Bob started off, and the outlaw miner followed in his tracks, covering him with his revolver.

The pugilist evidently saw that he could not well escape without serious injury, if at all. He had left his weapons among his effects at the saloon, and he knew that the miner had five chances to kill him, should he attempt to escape. Therefore he resolved to obey his directions until he saw a suitable chance to break away. For some time the two trudged along. Their route lay through a rough, rocky, and wooded portion of the country, and, as there was no moon, the journey was slow and tedious. At last the miner suddenly halted. "Sh!" he cautioned.

Then he stood stock-still, and listened intently.

"Thar's sum o' the b'yees heer; kin tell that," he finally muttered. "Wonder whar ther rest on 'em's gone to-night?"

Wildcat Bob was next pushed swiftly forward, the muzzle of his captor's revolver pressed against his back.

In the course of two or three minutes they suddenly debouched into a little glade of half an acre's extent, in the center of which burned a roaring camp-fire.

Around this lounged several rough, repulsive-looking fellows, reclining on blankets or sitting on rudely manufactured stools, as the case might be. All were either smoking, or drinking from a large demijohn that sat in a conspicuous place near the fire.

As Reuben ushered his prisoner out into the fire-light, those about the blaze arose with ejaculations of surprise, and crowded around.

"Who've ye got thar, Reuben?" demanded one, evidently chief in authority. "Whar'd ye pick up this crowd?"

"Up to Pompeii," replied Reuben, with a triumphant grin. "Collared him jes' 's slick as a whistle. W'at's yer judgment o' him, fellers?"

"He ain't nothin' scrumpysus," grunted the first speaker. "Who am he?"

"Wildcat Bob, the Boss Bruiser."

"The devil, you say!"

"Yas, he's ther feller w'at clipped ther captain's wings, sure's thar's modesty in a hornet."

"By all ther hunks, is this true? Ar' ye sure he's the same inderwidual w'at salivated ther boss?"

"On course I am! Didn't I parceive him sweep big Chucky White all inter no time in less time 'n it takes to h'ist bug-juice? He jest bewtchifully salted thet big California cuss fer all he war worth."

"Don't tell us! An' he's the rock thet bu'sted out ther boss' eye?"

"Ther identical same."

A lon' pause, during which the gaping crowd looked the prisoner over from head to foot.

"So you're Wildcat Bob, hey?" queried the leader, at last, as if he still doubted the pugilist's identity; "so yer the feller thet knocked an eye out o' Big Hank La Verge, hey?"

"I had the honor to do that little job," replied Bob, coolly. "Perhaps some of you would like to clench fists against me?"

But the outlaws only shook their heads. They had no such desires.

They knew when they were well off, and were quite satisfied to let well enough alone, as far as the Boss Bruiser was concerned.

At this juncture came the tramp of a horse's feet in the wood, and a horseman rode out into the glade, coming to a halt beside the fire.

He was tall and commanding in stature, but, unlike the other outlaws, wore a mask upon his face.

"What have you here?" he questioned, as he slid from the saddle. "Who is this prisoner?"

The outlaws explained in a few words, and then old Reuben asked:

"How is it that ye cum on ahead o' the other fellers, Darley?"

"To see that the route was clear. The boys ain't far off."

"How did ye make out, an' whar ye been to-night?"

"Had no luck at all. We went down to old Wood's mill after a sum of money some feller left him, but the cuss war game to the last, an' would not squeel out, so we sawed him up into fence boards and come away."

"Didn't git his darter?"

"No; she slid off somehow, and eluded the boys. Ha! there they come now. Better bind this fellow, or he may eel his way off before we kno' it."

Accordingly, Wildcat Bob was bound hand and foot, and thrown upon the ground. He could not resist, for never did the pistol in Reuben's hand leave a level with his heart.

His hopes began to sink, for he well knew that if Big Hank La Verge was among these ruffians, who so justly styled themselves the Bloodhounds, his chances for this world would be slim, indeed. The bully, after the loss of his eye, would have no mercy, and probably he would inflict the worst torture on his captive that his devilish brain could conceive.

Soon, as Darley had said, the outlaws made their appearance, a score of them filing out into the glade camp, and dismounting. They no longer wore the white robes that had enveloped their forms during the shocking tragedy at the mill, and were unmasked.

Several among the party Bob recognized as those who had been at the saloon, and prominent among these was Big Hank, the bully.

He seemed, if anything, larger and more ferocious looking than before, and the empty socket of his lost optic did not add to the beauty of his repulsive countenance.

He was the first to see his enemy, as he lay upon the ground bound and helpless, and a devilish gleam shot athwart his visage, as he advanced upon him.

"Wahoo! wahoo!" he roared, rubbing his horny palms together, a way of expressing his great delight; "heer we be, ther fam'us legitimately-born *gentlers* from ther sacred precincts o' howlin' yowlin' Kansas;—ther—ther grate squawkin', crowin', double-toed, flat-futed fightin'-cock monarkies or ther Topeky hen-roost;—ther cacklin', thin-beaked, egg producers o' ther rooster park, all polished, clipped, an' prepared tew fight enny other rival female hen that scratches dirt an' pizmires in this universal univarse!"

Here the giant was forced to stop for breath, and he glared about him to note the effect of his words on his fellow "roosters." All were grinning their approbation, and, seeing this, the tonguey gentleman from Kansas knelt by the side of the helpless pugilist, a broad smile of triumph on his ugly visage.

"Howdy do, my salubrious goslin', my festive snoozer, my lamblike, angelic buffer, howdy do! Glad to see ye, jes' like a cow is glad to see hay, only a darned sight gladder. How d'ye feel, how's yer constitoochinal inderwiduality? How's yer he'd, yer mouth, yer teeth—"

"An' yer eyes!" interrupted one of the outlaws, whereupon there was a general shout of laughter.

"Yes, yer eyes!" roared the bully, his face suddenly becoming black with anger. "Oh! ye cuss, ye darned little sneakin', white-livered de-cockshun of condemnedness, now I've got ye jes' whar I kin make ye feel how I luv ye. I'll kill ye by inches, ye reptile, ye creepin', green-eyed, smooth-faced lizzard!"

Wildcat Bob, ever cool and collected, gave vent to a low, tantalizing laugh.

"Oh! ye needn't laff, ye miserable goslin', ye foul odoriferous skunk; I'll make ye laff t'other side o' yer mouth 'twixt this an' sum other time. I'll make ye wish ye'd never see'd me, ther geolorous high-cockolorum o' ther Topeky henery—ther dubbel-spurred, thick-combed, yaller-necked fightin' cock o' howlin', yowlin' Kansas. Thet's ther kind o' a shanghigh I am:

"Ther shanghigh chicken
An' ther shanghigh hen,
Ther shanghigh robber
An' his shanghigh men,
Ther shanghigh creation
Ar' a pow'r'll fine fowl,
Whar kin beet the very devil
W'en they fight an' w'en they howl!"

"Hurra!" yelled one of the men, enthusiastic over the giant's uncouth poetical effusion. "Three cheers for the boss!"

And three long, loud cheers were accordingly given.

"Feller-roosters an' bug-juice h'isters," said Big Hank, arising and making a profound bow, "yer favyer has gon' clean inter my h'art, like a streak o' lightnin', an' I am pleased. Therefore, I opine we'd all better *saturate*!"

The proposal was received with universal approbation, and the demijohn was not nearly as full after it had been passed around as before.

Big Hank in particular lubricated rather freely, and then pranced up and down the camp without speaking a word, but evidently racking his brain for some terrible mode of torture that would furnish the most excruciating agony to the prisoner.

Finally he seemed to settle upon a plan, for his visage became contorted by a grin of demoniacal glee, and he renewed his prancing like a frisky colt.

"Wah hoo!" he roared, snatching off his hat, whirling it under his legs and catching it on his head again, after the manner of a circus clown. "I've grabbed it, I've originated ther de'th-warrant ov thet viper, thet danged white-livered snoozer. He shall stretch two hems at one time."

For once the Bloodhounds looked blank.

"How d'ye mean?" demanded Reuben, in a curious tone.

The bully laid down, rolled over, regained his feet, and laughed, evilly:

"Bring two hosses," he chuckled, executing a fancy dance before the helpless captive, "an' I'll larn ye how ter stretch two hems. Ye, Tom Darley, fetch two stout pieces of rope that measure ten or twelve feet in length."

Darley and a couple of his comrades hurried away to do their superior's bidding, and soon returned, leading the horses and bringing a half coil of rope. Reuben was about to cut this into the required length, when the bully snatched it from his hand, and cut it himself. One end of each piece was secured about the neck and heels of the prisoner, then, at Big Hank's order, the remaining ends of each piece were made fast to the saddles of the horses.

Now the full light of his awful peril seemed to dawn on Wildcat Bob; he knew full well what was the plan of torture to which he was to be subjected. *They were going to pull him asunder!* He had frequently heard the terrible torture described as being the favorite punishment among the Comanches, but had never for an instant imagined his own race heartless enough to inflict such a cruelty.

Big Hank watched the work till it had been completed, and then a fiendish chuckle escaped his lips.

"W'at d'ye think about *eyes* now, my gay an' festive Bob-o-link, ye feeroshus Wildcat-amunt? W'at's yer candid opinyun uv ther great high-cockolorum o' ther Topeky hen-roost, an' things in general now, my fine gosling? Hain't got very good liking fer ther dubbel-spurred, cacklin', he-male hen o' howlin', yowlin' Kansas, hev ye? No, I spec' not. Can't help et, tho'. Ye hed yer day, like every dog does, and salivated me about as much as mortal man ked stand; an' now thar's no reason afore ther grand jury why I shouldn't liquidate my debts ter you."

"Par'ps he'll beg yer parding, an' buy ye a glass eye," suggested one of the outlaws, attempting to be facetious.

"If you wait till I beg, maybe another eye will *grow* in the place of the lost one," replied Wildcat Bob, quite coolly.

"But I shan't wait!" growled the giant, fiercely, "shan't wait fer nothin'. Ye ken beg an' screech, an' plead an' yell's much as ye dang'd please, but et'll not help ye one iota. I'm goin' to count one, two, three, an' then, ef thar's enny virtue in boss-power, we'll see sum downright smart fun, bet yer boots!"

Wildcat Bob could not but help shudder at the heartlessness of the ruffian, as he concluded his brutal speech.

But one thing: he had not long to reflect upon his awful situation, for the bully immediately gave the order to make ready, and the ropes drew tight, so tight that the captive began to strangle with the grip about his throat.

"One!" said Big Hank, his one blazing eye feasting on the white face of the captive.

"Two!" after a slight pause.

"Th—!" He began the sentence, but never finished it, for at this juncture there came a volley of bullets from the forest, and a company of soldiery, headed by Lieutenant Perton, dashed out from the wood.

Seeing that they were greatly outnumbered, the Bloodhounds turned and fled.

CHAPTER XV.

INTO THE QUICKSAND—WILD CARLOS.

LET us now return to Charles Seton, whom, it will be remembered, we left on the branches of the tree that was each moment being engulfed deeper and deeper in the bed of quicksand.

Yes, there could be no doubt but that it was sinking. Below, the water boiled and swathed

and broke into bubbles, and steadily crept higher as the tree descended lower. One-third of the tree's length had already descended below the surface, and it would not take long for the remainder to follow.

"My God!" groaned the land-agent, convulsed by a terrible spasm of fear, "I shall be buried alive. This accursed tree will be the cause of my death. Oh! that I had never ventured up here. Nor would I but for the base ingratitude of another. A thousand curses go with the fools."

In his horrible rage he nearly, for the moment, forgot the danger that each instant grew nearer and more menacing. The tree was sinking faster and faster.

Was there no way in which he could free himself from this torturing imprisonment and make his escape?

In vain he cast about him for some sign that might offer even the faintest ray of hope.

But, no! all around him boiled and gurgled the waters that the descending tree was forcing upward out of their hitherto concealed depths—all around him yawned a sheet of the yielding and yet pitiless quicksand, in whose depths lay certain death.

There was nothing to hope for.

He could not leap across the treacherous sands, nor dare he attempt to leap into the bubbling waters and swim ashore. The sands would be sure to draw him down ere he could swim twice the length of his body.

No! he would not hasten his destruction. If it came to the worst, he might as well go down with the tree as to precipitate his death by jumping off at first.

Up and down the tree he climbed, now shouting frantically for help, now cursing, then showering invectives on the fugitive lovers who had led him all this long chase, and finally into a death-trap. But it did no good to curse.

The tree sunk steadily, and the bubbling waters rose higher. Half of the tree's length was now below the surface.

Nerved with desperation, he clambered up into the very topmost branches.

Here he seated himself, and dropping his head in his hands he wept—wept loud and bitterly.

Charles Seton had committed deeds at different periods of his existence that he well knew he would be required to answer for, before his God, and now he feared the summons before that Master. What was repentance for his past sins now? But he could not even repent—he was constantly cursing the memory of those two loving hearts who had been the cause of so much trouble.

Night fell darker and denser over the Frog Paradise, and the music from the croaking pests was almost deafening. Night-birds screamed and flattered among the reeds, and away off on the prairie the howl of the wolf was faintly audible.

And Thorpe and Amber—what of them?

The captive in the tree-top, as his thoughts reverted to them, could only think in imprecations.

Lower and lower sunk the tree, and as the waters crept about his feet, and further ascent was impossible, the land-agent felt chill after chill of horror run through his frame; and he looked into the dread hereafter with an agony that was awful.

The tree was now but the length of his body above the surface; in a few moments the quicksand would swallow up all with a mighty gulp, and the suspense would be over.

Seeing and boiling, the waters crept about the prisoner's ankles, and he ceased cursing, and, like one entranced, he watched the slow advance of inevitable doom—watched, his heart beating faster as he realized that the hand of death had already lain its hand with chilling coldness upon him.

Up, up, up, crept the waters, until they were about his waist. The clammy perspiration upon his forehead told of the agony and horror of that moment. He spoke not, nor did he writhe and struggle, but seemed resigned to the awful fate.

Higher crept the waters, and, when they were bubbling at his chin, and he felt his lower extremities caught in the treacherous sand, and tugged at as by a mighty hand, his horrified soul gave one long shriek as his last mortal utterance.

"Help! help! oh! merciful God, help!" he cried, and the echoes of the grim swamp answered back in weird voices—"God—help!"

But hark! his ear catches an answering cry; not the guttural croak of the noisy frog; not the angry scream of the night-bird, but a human cry—a cheery, ringing shout, that the sinking man distinguishes readily from all other sounds.

He looks; he sees a horseman urging his steed into the seething waters; he sees a long curling line shoot out into the darkness, and after a moment feels it settle into the waters and about his neck. Then it tightens, and he is in the grasp of two formidable enemies, Life and Death, and both are struggling for the mastery.

Beyond the swamp, on the stretch of green prairie before alluded to, rode two persons on a single horse, that was being urged both with

voice and spur to its swiftest speed. One was a young man, tall, handsome, and reckless of bearing, and the other a young woman, with light hair, eyes and complexion, who clung to the man, her face white with terror.

Darkness enveloped the land, and yet, beneath the faint glow of a few stars, a wild, exciting race was taking place this same night. First came the flying steed with its two riders; they were urging on the animal for dear life, though not a word more than the occasional "Get! get!" was spoken.

Not five hundred yards in the rear were two other horsemen, in hot pursuit, lashing their steeds furiously, and yelling hoarsely for the fugitives to slow up. They were old Jim Bings, and a companion styled Hard-Up, and were the only two of their party, save the whom Charles Seton had seen young Bloodgood shoot, that had given chase after the fugitives.

Indeed, they had not taken up pursuit until by chance they had seen the daring Thorpe mount their companion's horse and spur away. Then they had followed at their topmost speed, and, under the cover of night's dark veil, we now see the pursued and pursuers skimming the level prairie at high speed.

Thorpe Bloodgood's face was perfectly calm and composed, as his animal bore him along, and he sent back a defiant laugh at his enemies' frantic shouts, as they lashed their horses.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Amber Seton, shuddering and trembling, as the frightful imprecations of the pursuing wretches were borne to her ears. "Those terrible men will murder us!"

"I rather think not," was the reply, and the young man gave a satisfied chuckle. "They'll have to get up more steam on their racers than they've got there now, to even catch us, darling, and after they overhaul us it's my universal opinion that there'll be fun before they collar me."

"But you cannot brave two such heartless ruffians—"

"Can't I, though? Well, that remains to be seen. If I do not overestimate my manly skill and power, I wouldn't stump much that I am capable of laying out half a dozen or so of that sort of bums, without any serious difficulty."

"I am afraid that you do overestimate yourself in that," replied Amber, clinging closer about his neck. "They are bad, and will stop at nothing—"

"Short of a pepper-box, or a carver, in full operation," laughed Thorpe, bending and kissing her ripe rosy lips. "I think, however, that a little of those remedies would stop them. Pepper from a straight tubed box is sometimes infallible in such cases of follow-after-iveness, and if I only had a couple of shots left in my revolver, I am confident I could check those howling fools immediately."

"But you have no shot left?"

"Nary a shot. I gave five shots at the painter in the marsh, you know, and countin' the one at the outlaw it leaves me empty."

"You have your knife."

"Yes, I have that yet, and if worse comes to worst, I'll try my hand at fancy carving, at which I am good, especially on buffalo-steak!"

At this moment one of the ruffians sent a bullet in pursuit of the fugitives, but as the distance was too great it fell far short of the intended mark. It caused a faint smile of contempt to pass over the features of young Bloodgood, as he glanced back over his shoulder.

"The fools are rather free with their lead!" he said, chuckling over the distance he was putting between his animal and theirs. "If I were they I would wait till I got a few hundred yards nearer, at least. So long as they keep as far distant as they are at present, we need have no fears from that quarter, my darling."

"Oh! I am so glad; but will they not gain on us, Thorpe?"

"I rather reckon not, at the pace they are on, now. I think by this time their animal must be pretty nearly used up."

On, under the cover of the night's gloom dashed pursuers and pursued, but, although young Bloodgood knew it not, his enemies were gaining on him—very slowly to be sure, yet enough to satisfy the observant eye that they were gaining.

On—on—on—and louder and more triumphant grew the yells of Bings and his ruffianly companion—so much louder and so seemingly victorious, that the pursued glanced back over his shoulder in alarm.

"Get! get!" he yelled, using the spurs on his panting steed with renewed force. "We've got to get out of this in better shape than this, or there will be some tall fun, presently!"

Amber clung to his neck, her terror again getting the better of her. Had she been armed and mounted herself, she would have yelled at these yelling enemies; or, had her lover been armed, she would not have felt so much fear.

"It's nip and tuck, now," said Thorpe, as he drew his knife and pricked his horse into faster speed. "Those fellows hang to it like bulldogs. Things begin to have an appetizing look."

"I am afraid it is no use to keep up this mad race," replied Amber, shuddering at a foul invective one of the ruffians hurled after her, at

that moment. "It seems to me as if we were doomed to be chased to death, for our marriage."

"And it's all because of your father's hatred for my family," said Thorpe, bitterly. "If we die, darling, it will be together, and God will lay our murder at your father's door. Villain, that he is, he would gloat over the fact that we were dead."

"You know him, then?"

"Know him—know Charles Seton? Well, I rather reckon I do. I and my father hold a secret that would hang him before any court in the States. But, do not tremble, dearest. His crimes need not blot your pure life. You are your mother's child, more than his, and if you feel any love for such a monster, you had best banish it from your heart. He is a vile, bad man, and no good can come from loving him, I assure you. Ha! My God!"

Just then there was a sharp crack—the report of a rifle, and as young Bloodgood clasped one hand to his left side and reeled in his saddle, the shot was answered by a triumphant yell from the two pursuing ruffians.

"I am hit," gasped Thorpe, a deathly pallor overspreading his features. "They've done the work for me, I fear."

In an instant Amber Seton's presence of mind asserted itself. She reached quickly forward and reined the horse back upon its haunches.

"Quick! quick," she whispered, "slip from the saddle and crawl out of the way. I will ride on further, and also abandon the horse, and then return to you."

Just then, as if to favor the plan, a mass of clouds skurried across the face of the heavens, leaving the darkness more impenetrable than before, and taking the brief respite, the wounded man dropped to the ground.

Instantly Amber slipped into his place in the saddle, and jerked the horse off at a sharp right-angle, and when the ruffians were again able to discern her whereabouts she was to their right, bending low in the saddle, and speeding away like the wind.

With yells of rage they changed their course, and lashed their animals furiously in pursuit. On—on, and the curses they uttered made the desperate girl tremble lest they should overtake her after all, and murder her in cold blood.

On—on, and now she was dashing down a swell in the prairie, and for a moment was hid from view of her savage pursuers. It was her right and only moment to act. Reining the horse again upon his haunches, she slipped to the earth, and struck him a blow that sent him rushing madly down the slope.

Then she threw herself into the grass and crept quickly to one side. And not a moment too soon, for the next instant the ruffians came over the summit and rushed past her like the wind.

Up and away she sprung, taking the course that she thought would bring her to the spot where had dismounted her wounded husband.

She could hear the exultant yells of the ruffians, but well reasoned that soon they would discover their mistake, and then turn back. So she sped on, until suddenly she stumbled and fell.

It was over the senseless body of her wounded husband, who lay just where he had slipped from the horse. With a cry of horror, she bent over him.

Blood was flowing from his side, and his face was ghastly in its glassiness.

"Oh! Thorpe! Thorpe! speak to me—are you hurt very bad?" she moaned, brushing back his dampened hair. "Tell me!"

But no answer came. To all appearances he was quite dead.

Just then there came a wild shout.

The ruffians had discovered the riderless horse, and were coming back!

Almost mad with desperation, Amber seized her insensible husband with a strength that was born of terror and love, and, staggering under the load which she had thrown upon her bent back, she suddenly came upon a swift-running, narrow stream of water.

A canoe was beached upon the shore. No paddles were with it, but that mattered not. Summoning all her strength the brave girl lifted her helpless charge into the little shell, and pushing it out into the stream, sprung in herself.

Away—away, the craft was borne over the waters at an astonishing speed.

Away—and in her devotion and attention to her unconscious loved-one she heard not the roar of falling waters—knew not she was being borne on to be hurled over a cataract a score of feet in height!

CHAPTER XVI.

A QUICK TRIAL.

At the head of his men rode the lieutenant, and seeing that the ruffians were scattering, he gave the order to charge.

With curses and yells of rage the Bloodhounds fled, looking neither right nor left, as they sped across the glade and into the woods beyond. Full half their number fell beneath a destructive fire from the rifles of their enemy, and the remainder faltered; then turned and escaped under cover of the forest. Perton now or

dering his men back to where the scene of torture was to have been.

Wildcat Bob still lay upon the ground, the ropes about his neck and heels attached to the saddles of the horses that were to have aided in his execution.

He had watched the defeat of the Bloodhounds with but little interest, for he knew that in being rescued by the soldiery he was only escaping one death to meet another, and as Lieut. Perton dismounted and bent over him with a triumphant chuckle, the face of the captive betrayed not the slightest show of fear or regret.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the officer, stroking his mustache, as he surveyed his prize, "so I have you at last, eh, my slippery friend? Lucky that one of my spies' report caused me to pay this spot a visit, wasn't it? If I had come a few moments later, have you any idea where you would have been now?"

"In a cooler place than you will go to, when you turn up your toes!" replied Bob, defiantly. "I am not afraid to die in a just cause—can you say the same, you cringing viper?"

Perton flushed, hotly, and stroked his mustache with a little more vehemence.

"Your impudence I will overlook," he said, sarcastically, "as I shall soon wipe out the grudge I owe you, by having you shot. You have given me and my men more trouble than a little, and I shall show you how well it repays one to tamper and trifle with executors of the law."

"I s'pose you are one of those executors then," said the prisoner, with undisguised contempt, expressed in face and eyes.

"Certainly, I am."

"I pity the law, then, that's all. You are about as well fitted for the position you occupy as a crocodile is fitted for a prayer-meeting."

The lieutenant flushed redder than ever, and laid his hand upon the hilt of his sword; but a sarcastic laugh from the prisoner caused him to desist, and he glared into the calm face of the Wildcat, in a rage that he should allow himself to be annoyed so easily.

"Never mind!" he hissed; "I'll soon get square with you, and have my revenge—a sweet revenge, too. You can prepare yourself to be shot at sunrise!"

"But you have no right to shoot me, nor to have me shot!" said the pugilist, quite as coolly as though it were he who was master of the situation. "You will have to convey me to St. Louis, and there I will be given a trial, ere I am ushered out of this world into the next."

"I beg to disagree with you, my fine fellow. You will not be taken a dozen miles from here to receive your trial, sentence and death."

"Indeed! But you have no more right to pass sentence on me than I have to shoot you where you stand."

"Haven't I? Well, we will see about that. I think it will take but a few moments for my jury to find you guilty, and as for shooting you, I have the perfect right to execute the measures of the law, especially in this lawless land. You perceive that my followers have no particular liking for you; and my assertion to my superiors, that you were slain in an attempt to capture you, will be fully corroborated by them. Thus we can amply repay you for all the trouble you have given us, and not break the claims of the law, either."

"A very creditable plan," sneered the pugilist, eying his captor sternly. "You're certainly a very ingenious fellow, and may some day get to be President. But for your sad lack of courage and bravery, I predict that you would have been at the head of your nation long ago!"

The tone was so sarcastic, and the smile about the speaker's mouth so cynical, that Perton again grew red in the face.

"You accursed dog!" he cried, all aflame with passion. "Shall I shoot you without trial? I am tempted to!"

"Just as you like," was the cool answer. "A few hours in a case of life and death make but little difference to me."

Perton uttered an oath of exasperation, and sprang to his feet. Selecting half a dozen of his men he took them one side, and they held a short consultation together, after which the lieutenant again approached the prisoner.

"We have decided to return to our camp, a few miles to the north," he said, "where you will be tried for your crime, sentenced, and shot at sunrise."

He then mounted his horse, and his followers placing their prisoner on one of the horses left by the Bloodhounds, securing him to the saddle by stout cords, they sprang to their seats, and the cavalcade picked their way out through the forest, leaving the glade wrapped in darkness.

For three quarters of an hour they pushed on, and then emerged into another glade similar to the first, in which were pitched eight or ten small tents.

Here a general dismount was made, and the horses were tethered out to graze.

Wildcat Bob was allowed the freedom of his feet and conducted to a tent, over which a strong guard was placed to frustrate any attempt he might make to escape.

Here he was left alone for two or more hours, during which time he reviewed the past in his

mind, and cast sharply about him for some means of freeing himself in time to avert the death that was impending.

But all to no avail.

His hands were bound, he had no weapons, and there were three guards pacing around the tent outside. To make a break and elude them would be simply impossible. They could shoot him ere he could run a dozen yards.

No other chance, then, was there.

He would be tried by a few of the men composing Perton's command, would be found guilty, and shot according to the lieutenant's plans. He could not hope to be rescued from the jaws of death again, as he had been from the inhuman Bloodhounds.

No! nothing remained for him but to die. Die an ignominious death, and that, too, for the crime another man had committed.

Lieutenant Perton presently entered the tent, and there was a smile of such exultant triumph on his face that the prisoner ached to clutch him about the throat and choke the life out of him.

"Well!" he said, with a smirk. "How do I find you now, my fine fellow? Are you ready to meet your God, Robert Beecher, before whom you are so soon to go?"

The Wildcat frowned darkly.

"Do not call me that name again!" he replied.

"If you must call me anything, let it be Wildcat Bob, or my real name, Robert Bancroft. To the name of Beecher I lay no claim."

"Ha! ha! a good joke," laughed the officer, stroking his mustache; "a devilish good joke. I really admire your plan of taking a new name when the old one is disgraced. But, you know, the law takes the man—not the title!"

"And the wrong man, too!"

"I beg to differ with you on that point, but I suppose it would be a useless attempt to try and convince you that you are the man we want."

"Most assuredly. The man you seek died, I have learned, several days ago; was killed in a fight at Snicker's saloon, in the gulch mines."

"Indeed! Quite a probable story that, had you the right kind of an audience to swallow it. But at present I am not taking any stock in inventions. If such a man did really die, and you are shot, too, the law can be satisfied of avenging one of the foulest murders ever committed. As for me, I shall carry out my plans, and be justified in so doing."

"Humph! why don't you carry them out, then, and not come blowing around me, like some strutting peacock proud of his gaudy feathers? I can dispense with any quantity of your tongue without missing it!" was the curt retort.

The lieutenant again grew purple with anger, but wisely refrained from doing his captive personal violence, and soon turned and left the tent.

Half an hour later two soldiers entered, and signified their readiness to conduct the captive to the impromptu court before which he was to be tried.

Wildcat Bob arose without a word, and was led out into the glade.

Here were burning several large fires that lit up the early morning scene with a vivid glare, for day had not yet fully dawned.

Near the center of the glade were ranged the larger share of the soldiers in a semicircle, while confronting them were twelve men selected as jurors. Lieutenant Perton stood midway between the two divisions, and used a stump as a desk.

The prisoner was positioned directly in front of him, and guarded by revolvers in the hands of the twain who had conducted him from the tent. As he took his place, every man of the company watched him with the expectation that he would show some signs of fear—some appearance of dread for the approaching trial and subsequent execution. But in this they were greatly mistaken.

No face of marble ever was calmer or more in repose than the countenance of the pugilist. He eyed the faces of his enemies—for he considered every man present an enemy—with cool indifference, and now and then a faint gleam of contempt would flit across his visage, showing that he held them in no awe.

Lieutenant Perton opened the court.

"Robert Beecher," he said, "we now propose to try you for the murder of your wife, Agnes Beecher, on the 26th of August, 186—, at the Hotel, in the city of St. Louis. I am prepared to furnish such testimony against you as will hang you upon any gallows in the Union."

"We will hear your testimony previous to rendering a verdict," replied Wildcat Bob, seating himself upon the grass with the utmost nonchalance.

"Sir—r!" cried Perton, angrily, "you will please stand erect during this trial!"

"I please won't," was the instant reply; "I am going to sit!"

"I motion," said one of the jurors, "that we let him sit. It's the only chance he'll git atwixt this and the next world, very likely."

This was agreed to by the remaining eleven jurors, and so the lieutenant was obliged to assent.

He at once opened the court by a lengthy discourse, in which he went on to say that a certain

dashing fellow who was lively at fist-slinging, had wooed and won the beautiful daughter of General B—, and that on the night of the marriage had foully murdered his young wife, took possession of her money, jewels and valuable articles, and fled to parts unknown. The bereaved general had obtained the aid of a company of soldiery, under his (Perton's) command, and started them in pursuit, offering a handsome reward for the arrest or death of the murderer.

Two of the jurors then arose and testified that they recognized the prisoner as Robert Beecher, the wife-murderer, they having seen him in St. Louis previous to the marriage and the subsequent bloody deed.

"Now, sir," said the lieutenant, summing up the case—"now, sir, what have you, Robert Beecher, to say in defense?"

"Nothing more than I have told you several times before. You've got the wrong man!"

"We will not argue that point. I sentence you to be shot an hour hence, if the jury, which will now please retire, brings in a verdict of guilty!"

The jury accordingly withdrew to the cover of the forest to make a decision.

A half an hour dragged by, and Perton grew impatient, as they did not return.

"Perhaps they've got to drinking too freely," he growled, at last. "Hey! there; some of you fellows go and hurry up the lazy louts. Fetch them in!"

The soldiers hurried away in a body, taking it for granted that it would require the whole lot to hurry up the tardy jurors.

Another half hour passed, and neither the soldiers nor the jury put in an appearance, and the lieutenant began to get incensed as fury.

"Curse the fellows!" he growled, "why don't they come?"

Another half hour!

The lieutenant was wondering what he should do, when suddenly a band of horsemen dashed out into the glade. All were masked, and at their head rode the handsome outlaw, Carlos de Monterey.

"Free the prisoner!" he cried, as he drew near. "Wildcat Bob is no murderer, nor shall he die an assassin's death!"

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE GLADE—THE BULLY AGAIN.

THE outlaw's words were echoed by his followers, and a dozen rifles covered the heart of the trembling Perton.

"What means this?" he demanded, throwing as much sternness and authority into his tones as was possible. "Who are you, and what right have you to the prisoner of the law?"

"Carlos de Monterey knows no law!" was the retort, as the handsome chieftain slid from his saddle, and approached the prisoner. "He strikes for the poor and helpless, and against the rich and arrogant. You would have condemned and murdered this man for a crime he did not commit. His fate shall you suffer!"

So saying, with a single sweep of his knife he severed the cords that bound the prisoner, and Wildcat Bob stood upon his feet, free.

Then, after a firm grip of hands and a warm salutation, Wild Carlos turned toward Lieutenant Perton, who stood cowering and trembling under cover of the outlaws' rifles.

He felt sure that his fate was sealed.

"Ha! ha!" said the chieftain, a contemptuous smile curling his lip, "see the wretch tremble! He fears the death he would have meted out to an innocent man."

"I was but serving the law, and my country," whined Perton, growing white with fear, for the fierce gleam in Wild Carlos' eyes boded him no good. "You surely will not blame a man for doing his official duty?"

"I shall not be your judge, man!" was the stern reply. "You have never done me an injury, or you would not have lived until this. Yonder stands the person whom you have hunted from place to place, and to him you will have to look for mercy. If he says 'release,' release it is. If he wants you shot, my Lawless Rangers are at his service."

"And my men—what of them?"

"They are lying in yonder forest whence we came, bound hand and foot, and gagged; also guarded by a strong posse of the Rangers. We took them captive without wasting either lead or blood."

The lieutenant now turned to Wildcat Bob, with feigned hauteur.

"You have won again, young man, and I am ashamed to find myself in your toils. But as I do not care to lose my life, even in the interest of my country, and if you will now give me my liberty, I promise you, on my honor as a gentleman and a soldier, that I will withdraw my persecutions—that I will go back to my post and never offer to molest you again!"

A smile hovered about the bruiser's mouth, as he listened, and saw this man humbling himself before him because he was a craven and afraid of death.

"If it were my affair," said De Monterey, coolly, "I would make him expiate the crime as he intended you should do. It would be no more than right or just."

Wildcat Bob shook his head. He had no desire to take the life of a fellow-creature, unless forced to do so in self-defense, and after a few moments' deliberation, he said:

"Lieutenant Perton, I have no deadly enmity against you, nor do I want your life, for all you've given me a deal of trouble in the past. I have but to give the order, and these followers of Carlos de Monterey will shoot you. But I do not want your life, and will accept your proposition. Remember, however, that this is for the last time. Cross my path, ever again, and I will shoot you down like the dog you are. You are now free to go!"

A sigh of relief escaped the officer's lips, and he turned on his heel to depart, but Wild Carlos called him back.

"Hold! sir soldier! Your men are in the forest, under guard. Half an hour hence I will withdraw the guard, and you can go and release them. Go!"

Lieutenant Perton bowed coldly and hurried off. A moment later he was lost from view, having disappeared in the wood at the opposite side of the glade, and then the chieftain turned to Wildcat Bob, extending his hand which the pugilist grasped again and shook warmly.

"God bless you, old boy! You have saved my life again, and I know not how to thank you sufficiently. This makes three times you have come to my rescue—once up in Golden City, once at the Pompeii diggings, and lastly here. How can I ever repay you?"

"You repaid me years ago, comrade, when you saved me from being lynched by the Kansas vigilants. Carlos de Monterey never forgets a friend nor forgives an injury. So few are his friends that he knows how to prize one when he proves him true."

There was a thrill of sadness in the outlaw's voice, and he seemed suddenly touched with grief at something. Perhaps it was because he felt separated from the world and his fellow-men—an adieu to their love and sympathies.

He was an outlaw! That was enough to bar him out, and prevent his ever having any future association with civilization. But in a moment he cast off the spell, and grew brighter.

"By the way," he said, after they had conversed a few moments, "I have some bad news for you."

He then narrated how Thomas Lamonte had bought the Haunted Claim, and had subsequently left the legacy of gold to Iris Wood; how he (De Monterey) had twice met the young beauty, and fallen in love with her; how, through one of his spies, he had learned that the Bloodhounds had fiendishly murdered old Bill Wood.

"And Iris?" exclaimed Wildcat Bob, excitedly—"where is she? The Bloodhounds did not get her too?"

"No, thank God. My spy met her in the woods, searching for the family cow, and after he learned about the tragedy at the mill, he brought her to my retreat, where I saw her two hours ago, as I came into camp with a fellow I rescued from the quicksand in McVeigh's swamp."

"She is safe and well, then?"

"Perfectly so. Every attention shall be hers while she is my guest. I must beg to keep her, however, for a short time, for I am getting this and that together, and will soon have matured a plan by which I hope to clear away a veil of mystery that overshadows several lives—yours, my friend, in particular. Fortune has placed in my hands a most remarkable series of proofs, both animate and inanimate, which, when I have added a few remaining facts and proofs, I shall transform into a strange drama in real life, and I expose some of the most terrible crimes ever known. I and my men are constantly working to further this aim."

"What! is it possible that you, an utter stranger to my past history, can know aught of my birth—who I am, and who were my parents?"

"By good luck, I do. Every few days of late, circumstances have made me wiser as to the history of several parties who are to figure in my drama, and ere long much that has hitherto been in the dark will be brought to light. Wrongs will be righted, and crimes avenged. Now, my friend, I must bid you adieu. I suppose it is your intention to return to the Pompeii gulch?"

"Yes, I shall go back there for a time."

"Good. Should I need you soon to take part in my drama, I will then know where to find you. Look out for the Bloodhounds, and take care of yourself."

"I will keep a better guard, hereafter, rest assured. But, chief, there is one thing more I'd like to say. When you return to your stronghold, I should rather that you'd say nothing to Iris Wood of having met me."

"Indeed! And why so? She is certainly a very grand little lady, and moreover, is your sweetheart!"

"Ha! how know you that?"

"She showed me the coin check I gave you several years ago, and I judged from that."

"Humph! Yes, she has the talisman, to be sure, although I had nearly forgotten the fact. I will tell you, chieftain, why I prefer not to have my name mentioned in her presence. Not

long ago I rescued the girl, in the streets of Denver, from a gang of roughs under one Rowdy Ralph, who had attempted to kiss her. She was at the time stopping in the place, and while she was evidently smitten with me I was not less infatuated with her. We met several times per agreement, and the last meeting we had, I gave her your coin to remember me by, promising to pay her a call when I came down into this section. But since that I have found that I do not really, truly love the girl, except as I would love a sister, and, not having the heart to tell her so, I thought it best to let her forget me, if she could. You see now my reasons for not wishing to bring back to her the memory of our meeting."

"Certainly. Then you do not lay any claim to her, senor?"

"No. Did I love her enough to make her my wife, I should consider her a prize among women. But I have met another who has smitten me deeply, and I think this time I am done for."

A glad light shone in Wild Carlos' eyes.

"Brother—for you seem a brother to me," he said, "the fair Iris shall not lack for some one to love her. The heart of Carlos de Monterey went out to her on the first meeting, but believing that your affection was centered in the maiden, I forbore speaking of my own love. I think that I can teach her to love me, in time, and then, with her as my wife, the earth cannot contain a happier man. I love her, yet half afraid am I to tell her so, lest she scorn me as an outlaw and a man unfitted to care for a lovely woman. Have I your wishes, senor, for my success?"

"Most assuredly, chief. You will make her even a better husband than could I, and she is all that man could desire. Besides, you relieve me of an unpleasant duty, that of telling her that I do not love her enough to make her my wife."

"Did you ever have any female relatives, chief—a sister or a cousin?"

"I have a cousin in one of the Southern States, but that is all. Once there was a beautiful girl that I loved almost to idolatry, but she was stolen from my home and murdered, and since then I have been an outlaw to avenge her death."

"And have you avenged it?"

"No! alas no! But the day is not far distant when the foul fiend who destroyed my Jessie shall feel the blight of my hand. God granting, he will be one to take a prominent place in Wild Carlos' Life Drama."

The chief spoke the last words a trifle fiercely; then, once more he wrung the pugilist's hand, and turned away. This was the signal for the Wildcat to depart, and, taking possession of the weapons that Perton had left behind, he set out afoot toward Pompeii's gulch, and shortly before noon reached the mining settlement.

Things here had assumed their old shape, and but few were hanging about the two saloons, the greater share being engaged in the gulch below, panning and "cradling."

Colonel Tupper was anxious about his "star's" disappearance, but when he saw him enter through the doorway of the "Spread Eagle," he at once became all smiles again. Upon inquiry Bob found that M. Leek had been there after Ma Belle, but on the colonel's refusal to give her up to him, he had gone away uttering threats against the whole establishment.

After making himself as presentable as possible, the bruiser entered the room behind the bar, and found his charge partaking of a late breakfast. She arose on his entrance, however, and greeted him warmly, her pretty face all aglow with pleasure at his coming.

"I was afraid you had forgotten me already," she said, pointing him to a seat by the table beside her; "and really, I think, you must be hungry, for the landlord said you had been absent since last night; so I shall insist upon your breakfasting with me. The establishment gets up a very creditable meal."

Now Bob was as hungry as a bear, and he did not hesitate in accepting the young beauty's invitation; and, accordingly, both seated themselves before the repast.

"As if I could ever forget you!" he said, candidly, giving her a tender glance that caused the color to fly to her cheeks. "I believe I should sooner forget to eat, and that is an impossibility so long as there is plenty of provender to be had for the asking."

"Oh! you are making sport now."

"I mean what I say. Once seen, you are not so easily forgotten, especially by a person like myself, for instance, upon whom your beauty has taken such a strong hold. To love you would be as natural as seeking the sunshine."

If Wildcat Bob received just a very slight box upon the ears then, he had himself to thank for it. But it seemed to him he could endure several slappings if they were administered by the soft fair hands of Ma Belle. Her touch thrilled him, and her smile made him forget all else except that he was happy.

"There! take that, you presumptuous fellow!" cried Ma Belle, with one of her peculiar laughs, as she gave the boxer a loving blow. "You should know better than to speak such nonsense to me."

"And why not make love to you? You are certainly beautiful enough to love, and good enough too. On the whole, no more lovable woman have I ever had the fortune to meet than your charming self."

The pugilist's tone was serious now. He was not much on "makin' love," but he had commenced now, and meant to go through with it.

Ma Belle flushed and averted her head; but with the persistency of mankind he caught it between his two hands, and gently forced her to face him, while he gazed steadfastly into her eyes, as if trying to read the secrets of her heart. She blushed, trembled violently, and tried to disengage herself, but he held her firmly, and continued to gaze into the depths of her clear blue orbs, as if searching for knowledge hidden there.

Gradually a sense of peaceful security came over her, and she ceased struggling. But she dropped her eyes from his rapt, almost hungry gaze, while a continual wave of carmine blushes swept over her beautiful face.

"Mine, mine alone," he murmured, softly, while he rained passionate kisses on her lips.

Then, suddenly, as if to mock his happiness, arose a voice in the barroom outside. Putting Ma Belle aside, he sprang to the door, and the next instant was in the apartment whence came the voice. And he was not mistaken. There stood, in all his repulsive glory, the overgrown bully—Big Hank!

CHAPTER XVIII

MAN TO MAN.

Yes, there stood the giant chief of the Bloodhounds, in all his glory, armed with a small arsenal of weapons, and giving vent to his jovial feelings by hopping, skipping, and jumping about the bar-room, while his tongue was not in less motion than his limbs.

"Wah hoo! wah hoo!" he roared, doing a somersault with an ease and grace something remarkable, considering his immense avoirdupois. "I'm ther great high-cacklin' cockolorum o' Kansass; ther dubbel-j'inted, twist-tailed, polished-spurred, thick-combed rooster o' ther Topecky hen-roost; ther fam'uss clipped-winged game ginny-hen o' ther howlin', yowlin' wilderness; ther historick fightin' banty shanghigh o' ther peeraries. Oh!"

"It's ther shanghigh chicken
An' ther shanghigh hen
An' ther cockolorum robber
An' his shanghigh men;
Ther shang—"

"Hello! w'at's this I parseeve? Ar' I dreamin' or ar' I not, or is this really ther speerit o' ther departed dead?"

So cried the bully, as Wildcat Bob issued from behind the bar and confronted him.

"There are no spirits here, unless they're 'ardent speerits,'" replied the pugilist, grimly. "All thar is o' me is flesh an' bone, and now, you old elephant, we'll settle the little account that is standing between us."

"Ther ackount?" gasped the giant, quailing under the fire of his adversary's eye; "thar ackount! Why, bless yer little toe-nail, my verdant goslin', ye don't mean ter intermate thet me, ther grate egg-spekulatin' shanghigh o' howlin', yowlin' Kansass, owes ye anythin', do ye?"

"Perhaps you don't owe me a great measure, sir, but I have the pleasure of owing you a small debt of gratitude, and this is the precise opportunity I crave to wallop you. Do you hear, you lumbering elephant? I'm going to baste you for the attempt you made to make two men out of me, last night. How will you take it now—toe, tooth or knuckles; or carver, barker, or arrow?"

"Ye don't go fer ter cackle thet ye're on a fightin' fit, do ye?" replied Big Hank, uneasily, hitching, as he spoke, out of arm's length. "Ye ain't agoin' ter peril yer individuality by confrontin' me, ther game banty o' ther golden roost, ar' ye? Why, my diminutive goslin', I'd scorn ter tackle so small an object as ye. No feller with a bit o' human pity in his boosum fer ther small an' ther big, ked harm sich a little insect like ye. Why, you're nothin' but a pigmy—a slender, tender plant o' natur, an' I'd no sooner think o' chawin' up a helpless innercent like ye, than I would o' swallowin' ther tail-feathers o' a kangaroo."

"You are a coward!" was the contemptuous reply, "and afraid to fight."

"Afraid? great spurs o' Job's turkey! d'ye heer ther banty talk? Afraid to stan' up an' fight! Who'n ther name of ther Sulkin' Sam'l ever heer ther ekal! Afraid ter fight—me, ther great high cockolorum o' ther Topecky hen-roost—ther cacklin', scratchin', diggin', pullin', fa'r-play he-male fowl o' howlin', yowlin' Kansass. Oh! Latimer! It makes me larf jes' like an overjoyed shemaline mule, arter he's been tickled under ther fiftieth rib wi' a peck o' long oats. Young feller, I'll allow ye're 'bout as presumphus an animile as they manyfackter now-adays!"

"I'll make you laugh on t'other side o' yer mouth presently. Comed come! are you going to square off?"

"Responsively, no! Brave an' honer'ble cock

thet I am, et is ag'inst my moral sentimentz ter attack an' wilfully kersmutch ennything uv more pigminian dimensions than myself, an' consекently I feel it my duty, as a preecher an' pillar o' ther church, not ter git offended an' take up yer preposterous challenge."

"Humph! how cowardly you have grown since I relieved you of your left eye," said Wildcat Bob, sarcastically. "It must be you have been haunted by the spirit of him you murdered at the mill!"

The ruffian started, and whitened.

"Whit do you know about that?" he demanded, hoarsely, while his hand sought his knife. "Better ye keep mum!"

"No, I will not keep mum. Gentlemen, in this big, cowardly ruffian here, you behold Hank La Verge, the chief of a band of cutthroat desperadoes who style themselves the Bloodhounds. Last night the infernal crew visited Wood's mill, down in the lower gulch, and because the old man refused to give them his gold, they *sawed him to death!*"

A cry of horror went up from the few bystanders who were in the saloon.

"You lie! you're a double-dyed liar!" roared the giant, drawing his knife and rushing upon his enemy. "Ye cursed devil, I'll show ye w'at it means ter go blattin' yer lies about me. Take that!"

He struck a fearful blow at the pugilist's breast, but, with a skill and ease that were quite astonishing, the latter leaped quickly on one side, his iron fist at the same instant reaching the bully over the right eye. Down he went to the floor, while his murderous knife flew to the opposite side of the room, the point piercing a pictured nose of the Father of Our Country fair and square in the center.

Up sprung Big Hank again, his face flaming with an awful rage, and the lunge he made at his calm antagonist might have carried an ox from its feet. But the pugilist met the attack by simply stretching forth his wonderful right arm, and with a howl of pain the bully again went crashing down in a quivering heap. Again and again he staggered to his feet, cursing and foaming at the mouth, but every time the iron fist of the Boss Bruiser met him with a stunning certainty, and he was stretched out for inspection on the floor. The last time he fell it was in an insensible condition, and like some grim chained monster he lay where he had fallen. His face was all bloody, bruised and battered, and the right eye swollen shut. A more repulsive, horribly distorted object would have been hard to find.

"There!" said the pugilist, as he saw that the ruffian was vanquished. "That is just the sort of a lesson he needs every day to keep him under subjection. He's *tamed* for the present."

"So I should say!" remarked Major Bloodgood, facetiously, "but I should awfully hate to have you administer such a licking to me every day, for a lesson. Practically viewing the case, I should say that you rough is in a sad state."

"If he was in a civilized State!" added ex-confederate Chauncey, wittily, "he would have been hanged for murder, long ago."

As there was nothing much to interest him about the town, unless it was the fair Ma Belle, whom he felt it policy not to visit too often, the hero of the fists armed himself, and mounting his horse, rode off down the gulch.

Out of respect for Iris, he felt it his duty to visit the old mill, and give the murdered miller a decent burial. His horse was fresh and a swift, wiry animal, and it took him but a little more than an hour to reach the mill, which he did about three hours before sunset.

He found, however, that he had made the trip for nothing, for the Bloodhounds had burned the mill to the water's edge, and the bones of poor Wood had been swept away by the flood that dashed over the dam.

The cottages formerly occupied by the miller had also been burned, and there was naught about the spot of life or cheerfulness.

After gazing about on the desolate scene for a few moments, and perceiving that there remained nothing for him to do, Wildcat Bob turned his horse's head and rode silently away up the gulch. On his way, he spied the windlass and curb over the shaft, that had won the reputation of being a haunted mine, and a strange desire came over him to explore the place and see how truthful were the reports concerning it.

As he noted the fact that he still had an hour before sunset, in which to prosecute his search, he became resolved, and dismounted at the curb. Securing his horse in a place where he could graze, he approached the shaft and peered over the curb.

The bucket was down in the bottom, which was so far below the surface that the sharp eyes of the pugilist could not penetrate one fifth of the blank, gloomy distance.

After listening a few moments, and hearing no sound, he wound a couple of rags about his hands, and seizing the rope, stepped over the curb and allowed himself to slide downward.

Down—down—down, and still he came to no stopping-place. His hands were nearly blistered and burned by the rope slipping through them, and his arms ached from their one constrained position.

Down—down; would the weird journey never end? It seemed not, for as yet he could tell by instinct that he was up in mid-air.

On—on—on!

Still the rope slid through his grasp, and he shot rapidly downward. Suddenly his feet detached a piece of rock from one side of the shaft, and clutching the rope tighter he remained silent, and listened eagerly for the missile to reach the bottom. It struck sooner than he had expected, and he knew that his journey was nearly at an end. With a joyful exclamation he descended, and in a moment stood upon the bottom.

Yes, upon a solid rocky bottom, and surrounded by a shroud of gloom so dense and impenetrable that he could not see a hand before his face.

Groping blindly about, and feeling his way around by the aid of the wall, he soon came to a passage running off from the shaft. Far away he could see a chink of light, but not knowing whether it was fire or the glowing orb of some wild beast, he hesitated to advance. For several moments he watched the faint star-shaped gleam, and saw that it remained perfectly stationary. Was it light, or simply a delusion of his eyesight? And if a light, was there a person or persons in the subterranean vault, and who were they?

Over and over the Wildcat asked these questions, as he stood, undecided what to do. At last, however, he was about moving forward, when his foot struck something lying on the rocky floor, that tumbled away, making a queer jangling noise. Searching about he soon found it, and imagine his surprise and delight when he found that it was a bull's-eye lantern.

Feeling in his pocket he found a couple of matches, and soon succeeded in striking a light, which shone through the nozzle of the lantern, flooding the passage with its bright rays.

"Now, I can pursue my exploration with more ease and safety," muttered Bob, taking the lantern in one hand, and carrying a cocked revolver in the other. "This light is a capital thing. Now, let's see what the light is that I saw off yonder."

He made his way straight along the passage, carefully and cautiously, keeping his revolver ready for instant use. The passage was some five feet wide by eight in height, and at intervals other smaller halls and niches branched off. The atmosphere, too, was almost stifling, and it was only by hard efforts that the pugilist could breathe.

All along the bottom of the passage were two rails which had probably been laid to run an ore-truck upon to the shaft.

After several minutes' walk, the explorer found his further progress suddenly checked.

The passage was choked with a mass of rock that had fallen from the ceiling overhead, and whether it extended any further than this he was unable to determine. Two side passages diverged to the right and left, at this juncture, and these he concluded came to an end at a short distance away.

As the pugilist stood looking at the pile of fallen rock, several bright sparks in among the granite caught his eye, and one of these he picked up. Holding it in the light of the lantern, he was not a little surprised to find that it was a small nugget of gold.

"Egad! this *is* luck," he muttered, slipping the precious morsel into his cartridge-pocket. "Better I look sharp, for there may be more where this came from, and who has a better right to it than myself, I should like to know? Rather think nobody has!"

He sat the bull's-eye on the floor, and dropping on his knees, began to search for more of the shining sparks.

So engaged was he in his work that he failed to see something creeping upon him from the rear, which, otherwise, must have startled him.

Something, we say;—an object clad in ragged feminine garments, with long, matted hair, burning, fiery eyes, and a face ghastly, grotesque and horrible, with its deep wrinkles and furrows, and its large grinning mouth exposing a few long fangs.

It was a woman—there was no denying that—but such a repugnant and repulsive creature as one would not like to encounter, often.

Stealthily nearer and nearer to the absorbed worker she crept, not making so much as a sound in her movements.

At last she stood directly over him—but only for a moment. The next instant she had thrown her whole weight upon him, and dragged him back to the floor.

Never for a moment losing his presence of mind, he clinched with her, and they rolled over and over on the rocky floor. She was his match in strength, he soon found, and writhe, twist and work as he would, he could not free himself from her determined clutch.

All the while she gave vent to an incessant snarling chatter, relieved occasionally by a terrible shriek.

Over and over they rolled, she endeavoring to choke the life out of him, and he trying to free himself from her tenacious embrace. Now, she would be on top, spitting, snarling and jabbering like the wild beastly creature she was; then

he would succeed in turning her, though, strive as he best might he could not get free.

During one of their struggles he got one of her fingers in his mouth and bit it savagely, hoping thereby to cause her to release her grip. But she seemed not to notice the fact and only chattered, shrieked and jabbered the harder. Soon the lantern was knocked over, and the passage was enveloped in a pall of Stygian gloom.

Over and over, and the moments fled by; still the wild, desperate struggle continued. The pugilist saw that one thing was a certainty, and that was: the struggle would not end until one or the other gave out. And he felt that he would be the first one to yield. Already he was continually growing weaker and weaker, while the strength of the wild creature seemed to increase.

And still the struggle waged on.

Night had fallen over Pompeii's gulch and the surrounding country—a night that was sultry and breathless. All the saloons were vacated for the open air, and midway between Snicker's "Heifer Shebang" and Tupper's "Spread Eagle Ranch," a majority of the population were congregated about an improvised stand under the immediate superintendence of no less a personage than Professor Doerflinger, high graduate in pharmacy.

"Walk right up, gentlemen!" he was saying, flourishing himself about in a promiscuous style, "walk right up, and receive a free sample o' the Elixir o' Life—the greatest pharmaceutical triumph of the Nineteenth century—the cure-all warranted to relieve all pain, mental and pecuniary distress and suffering, and to drive away despondency, ill-luck, ill-temper, and all of the ills that the human flesh is heir to. Recollect, gentlemen, it costs you nothing to try this wonderful and efficacious remedy; this panacea that permeates health and happiness to one and all, alike.

"It costs you nothing I say, because in order to introduce the Magic Elixir, I have determined to make a gratis distribution of one thousand bottles, this night, among you. I want every man to have a bottle—every man, woman or child to have one bottle of the triumph of the age—the wondrous remedy that raises all mankind from the sloughs of despond, and starts him on the straight route to salvation!"

One by one the vast assemblage stepped up and was presented with a vial of the famed Elixir, which found room immediately afterward in their respective stomachs, as all were eager to be cured, the secret of the Professor's little whisky game being generally known throughout the diggings, and the few new arrivals who had not heard of the game were speedily apprised of the excellent quality of the liquor dealt out under the disguise of medicine, and made haste to receive a bottle for drinking purposes.

The Professor's advent was a dampener to the saloonists, Tupper and Snicker.

All their custom left the hot saloons for the more congenial atmosphere outside, where they could listen to the oily gabble of the talkative professor and at the same time "liquidate" without expense.

"Yes, gentlemen!" cried Doerflinger, his tones swelling to the strength of a Stentor, "the Elixir has no equal from their north pole to the south, from the east pole to the west. It stands unrivaled for efficacy in all diseases and worldly afflictions, and is dog cheap at the price as you will all allow.

"Why, sirs, just look at its pedigree:

"In Jacksonville it cured a female who actually destroyed every building she approached, so bad did she have the ague. In New York it cured the smallpox so fast, and took so much traffic away from the local physicians, that they actually mobbed me out of town. In Baltimore it cured a senator of the jimjams, and in Denver, the last place I visited, it cured five people of the seven-years' itch, and four of epileptic fits!"

This settled the affair. Every man who had not procured two or three bottles of the elixir hastened to do so at once, and the medical agent soon shouldered his luggage and tramped away.

An hour later.

A strange quiet has fallen over Pompeii's gulch and its population. Not a person is seen moving, and no shouts or drunken curses awaken the night echoes. Presently a man creeps away from the vicinity of the saloons, goes swiftly down the gulch for perhaps a hundred rods, and then comes to a halt before a body of men whom at a glance we recognize as the notorious Bloodhounds, with Big Hank at their head.

"It's all right, cap'n," says the voice of Professor Doerflinger. "Every man in the place is drugged by the elixir, which has done remarkable execution. All you have to do, now, is to make a charge, and all the gold in the diggings is yours."

Half an hour later the same band were at this point again, where their horses had been left. Among them were several female captives, and by sacking the settlement they had robbed every man of his earnings, while he slept from the ef-

fect of a villain's cunning preparation of drugged liquor, styled the Elixir of Life.

"Feller bug-juice histers!" said the high cockolorum of the Topeka hen-roost, "I opine, seein's we've did a fa'r squar' job, thet we'd better take the gals, and scoot!"

And, accordingly, the gang did "scoot."

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE MINE—TOO LATE!

GREAT was the excitement in Pompeii!

On the morning following the swoop of the Bloodhounds, every man awakened from a drugged slumber, into which the Life Elixir of Professor Doerflinger had thrown him, only to find that he had been ruthlessly plundered of every cent, by some unknown thief.

Those who read the Tribune during the mining excitement around and in the vicinity of Denver, will probably remember a case similar to this, where a whole mining town was drugged and robbed by a notorious band of desperadoes.

Yes—robbed of every cent on their persons; and in fact the whole settlement had been plundered of all the gold and currency that could be got hold of. The saloons had been overturned and pilfered, and Colonel Tupper's safe, in which he kept a small part of his fortune, and in which he kindly secured the earnings of various miners, had been blown open and its contents taken.

All the waiter girls were gone, and as no dead bodies were found, it was inferred that the unknown robbers had carried them off into captivity.

Nearly distracted over his loss, and fearful of the safety of Ma Belle, the colonel made haste to burst into her room, in the rear of the bar. To his horror and consternation, he at once perceived that she was gone, too. She had been carried off with the other girls. Of that there could not remain the least doubt!

That was an exciting day in Pompeii.

Probably never in the annals of gold-digging did a greater volume of oaths and curses rend the air, than on that memorable occasion. The miners were utterly frenzied and maddened over their losses, some of which were trifling while others were enormous. Two gamblers—one a monte-man and the other a faro-banker—had been cleaned out of four thousand apiece, and one old veteran miner had lost five thousand's worth of pure dust, which it had taken years of hard toil to accumulate.

The remainder of the population had suffered generally from five dollars upward to five hundred, and were as bitter in their anger as their more unfortunate companions.

Bands of ten and twenty were formed to give chase to the thieves, who were undoubtedly the Bloodhound Band of which Wildcat Bob had spoken; and by noon the settlement was pretty well deserted, only Tupper, Snicker, and a few loafers remaining behind.

Foremost in the search for the desperadoes were Mr. Chucky White, the California "champion," and Major Bloodgood. The latter commanded one of the parties in the search, and, although he had lost nothing by the raid, he volunteered to go in pursuit of the daring gang that had perpetrated so bold an outrage. His route lay down the gulch in the direction of the Haunted Claim, at which spot the unsuccessful party arrived at midday, not a little discouraged and a good deal angered.

"I reckon we have journeyed far enough in this direction," said the major, as they drew rein about the curb of the old shaft. "If they had come this way we should have seen their tracks."

"They mought've follered ther creek down, tho'," said one of the miners, "an' hid their trail thet way."

"True, they might have done that, yet it is hardly probable."

"Look here!" exclaimed Chucky White, pointing to the sand about the curb wherein were both the prints of men and horses' feet. "Some one has been here lately, and maybe it is the robbers."

"Hardly. There is the hoof-prints of only one animal here, while, judging by the signs we saw at the town, there must have been a score or more of the raiders."

"You're right; but might not the heft of the gang rid off in different directions, ter puzzle us pursuers, while the chief-cook'n'-bottle-washer of the bizness came here and hid the plunder? Sich bein' the case, don't it smell savorily that this old mine ar' a robber-den?"

"By heaven! White, there is logic in your reason!" ejaculated the major, delightedly. "Perhaps, after all, we're on the right scent."

"Look! thar's a horse too!" cried one of the miners, pointing into a thicket of bushes just across the gulch.

In an instant all was excitement, and every man had dismounted.

"You fellows remain here," ordered the major, cocking one of his six-shooters, "while I go and look at the animal."

The miners readily assented, and while he was absent they drew the bucket up from the bottom of the shaft.

In the meantime the major entered the thicket, and examined the horse, which, as the reader probably knows, was the steed of Wildcat Bob,

which he had tethered out to graze upon the foliage, while he descended into the mine. But the major knew nothing of this, and soon rejoined the men at the curb, with the intelligence that the horse undoubtedly belonged to the robbers, and, as a matter of course, the robbers were in the bottom of the mine.

"If such ar' ther case," said one of the miners, "et'll take heeps o' fightin' to git 'em out o' thar, ye can jes' bet yer old boots."

"I think not," replied the major. "If we work the machine right, I'm of the opinion that we can surprise them all hunky. Besides, I am not so sure that there is more than one of the crew down thar."

"Exactly; an', then, ag'in, ye ain't so sure but ther hull caboodle o' 'em is thar."

"True, but I think the former is the more probable theory. Now, my plan is this: I'll leave half o' ye up here to lower us down and protect the mouth of the shaft, while I, with the rest of the boys, will go down and see what we can find in the mine. When we jerk on the rope it will mean that we want you to pull us up lively."

"Shall I stay up here?" demanded the famed champion of California, who did not relish the idea of getting so far down in the earth, for fear that he would never be able to get out again. "I can defend the top while you attack the bottom."

"Just as you like about that. Now, boys, hunt up some dry knots that will answer for torches, and we will make a descent."

Plenty of pitchy pine-knots were procured and lighted, and then the party that was to go down with the major clambered into the bucket, after which they were lowered into the yawning shaft.

It seemed an age to them ere they touched upon the deep bottom, but they did at last, and Major Bloodgood was the first to step out from the car.

"Keep mum now, boys," he cautioned, in a whisper, "and tread softly. We know not how soon we may stumble upon a nest of the hornets we are searching for."

"Hedn't we better douse the glim?" asked one of the miners. "It may show us ter the cusses afore we git a peep at them, an' we'll consequently get riddled."

"No; we can't do without light, and shall have to use it. I'll tell you a good plan, however. All of you put out your torches, and cover my advance with your pistols. I will go on a few yards ahead with the light, and, if you see me fall, fire at my murderers and make a rush."

This was readily agreed to, and all but the major's torch were extinguished. He then went on along the passage several yards in advance of the miners, who brought up the rear with cocked revolvers leveled at his back, and thus the march began.

As he went along, Bloodgood kept on the alert, and his eyes scanned each side narrowly. The miners in his rear followed with noiseless tread, half expecting each moment to hear a pistol-shot and see the daring man fall.

On through the passage marched the weird procession, the light of the glaring torch making each object strikingly distinct and ghostly.

Suddenly the major was seen to fall to the ground, and the same instant the torch went out, leaving the passage in Egyptian darkness.

Not waiting a second to learn the cause of his precipitation, the miners instantly discharged their revolvers ahead into the gloom, and the vault was filled with a thousand reverberating echoes.

"You 'cursed idiots!" roared the major, springing to his feet, half choked with powder-smoke, "what, in God's name, 'd ye do that for? I only fell to the floor over an object lying here in my path, and there was no occasion for such a devil of a rumpus. Strike a light, some one, quick! If there's any robbers within a thousand miles, they probably know we're after them, by this time."

A light was accordingly procured in as short a space of time as was possible, and the major saw what it was he had fallen over. There on the floor, locked in each others' embrace, lay Wildcat Bob and the mad creature who had engaged with him in the desperate and troublesome contest.

Both were unconscious, and evidently dead, and it was plain that neither had given up till utterly worn out and incapable to struggle longer.

"My heavens! boys, it is the prize-fighter, Wildcat Bob!" cried the speculator, starting back aghast. "This explains it. That is his horse, above, and there are no robbers here. To work, men; tear him apart from that creature's embrace, and let's bear him up out of this foul place, to where he can get fresh air, and we may be able to bring him back to life, yet. Thunder! but they've fit like beasts, though. Just look at the blood-stains around here. More than a gallon o' juice been spilled. What ever possessed the boy to come down here, I wonder, and who is this disgusting old wretch he's hitched to?"

The men went to work with a will, and soon succeeded in freeing the insensible pugilist from

the clutch of the old hag, after which they bore him back through the passage to the shaft.

When they were all crowded into the car the rope was jerked, and they were wound upward by degrees until the outer world was reached.

While some of the miners stopped to relate their adventures, others bore Wildcat Bob to the banks of the creek and set about bringing him back to life.

It was a long, tedious undertaking, for to tell the truth, the young man was pretty nigh "gone over the dam."

But, at last, after his wounds had been skillfully dressed by the major, and quantities of water had been doused over him, he became conscious, and was able to give an account of his experience since leaving the settlement, until insensibility had overtaken him in the mine.

Chucky White then proposed that the major start at once for Pompeii with Bob, and see to his wants, while the rest of them again struck out after the robbers, which was agreed to; and soon the plan was put into execution.

In a beautiful forest-dell, miles westward by north from the Haunted Claim, a company of men were formed in line of march, and were awaiting orders from their commander, who stood a few yards apart from them, conversing with a coarse, brutal-looking ruffian, apparently one of his own followers.

The commander, a very giant in size, we make no difficulty in recognizing as Big Hank La Verge, the Bloodhound chief, while his companion, a man smaller in stature and older in years, rejoices in the cognomen of Jake Corrigan.

"Yas," the giant was saying, grimly, shifting his position to lean against a large tree under which they stood—"yas, ther thing's got ter be did, sure pop. You say the out-train is due at the trestle-bridge at midnight?"

"Yes. Ther express leaves Denver for the east at seven o'clock, an' gits to ther trestle-bridge about midnight."

"And the gold—how much is ther uv thet?" demanded the ruffian, eagerly.

"I couldn't git ther percazt figgers, but frum w'at ther express agent said, I rec'on 'tain't less'n fifty thousand dollars."

"Good. Thet amount'll help our treasury a big lot, when we git it. Now, how do ye perpose to capture the train?"

"This way. Ther 'butments an' timbers of the bridge will be heavily charged w' powder, and when the train gits fairly on the trestle we'll blow it ter flinders. All thet escapes w' their lives, frum ther fall of twenty feet, we kin soon dispatch, an' then the contents uv ther express car will belong to our Bloodhound Brotherhood!"

"Corrigan, you're a boss pard. When ye wer' inishiated, years ago, the time when our present commander-in-chief occupied the persition I now occupy, I didn't think yer membership w'ld ever bennyfit ther brotherhood, but now I think different. I wish I war' free to go w' ye, but I ain't, fer ther reason thet I've got a wound here in my arm, thet unfits me fer duty."

"There's no need fer ye to go," replied Corrigan, consolingly. "I can manage the boys, and give ye a much needed rest. Now, then, I opine we'd better git a-going, eh?"

"Yes; the sooner the better!"

The two ruffians then shook hands, after which Corrigan leaped into his saddle and joined his men, while Big Hank likewise mounted and set off toward the east. The Bloodhounds went due north, and soon the dell was wrapped in silence.

Then it was that a man slid down from the branches of the tree underneath which the two ruffians had been standing, and dropped to the ground.

He was no other personage than Carlos de Monterey, the outlaw, and he had heard enough of the brutal Bloodhounds' plot to know that it was their purpose to destroy the eastern train from Denver, in order to rob it of a consignment of gold from a leading broking house to an eastern mint.

"And I must save the train!" he muttered, as he looked to his weapons, and tightened his belt. "I have just sixteen miles to ride in an hour and three-quarters, in order to reach Denver before the train starts, and, God granting, I will make the trip and save a load of life and money!"

So saying he hurried into the forest, and soon came to a spot where a horse was awaiting his coming.

Into the saddle he leaped at a bound, and without the touch of the spur the animal dashed off through the timber, the rein guiding him in the direction of Denver.

"Go! go!" cried Wild Carlos, as at last they left the wood, and a stretch of undulating prairie lay in their front; "go, old boy, for this is a ride of life and death."

Away—away at a break-neck speed leaped the spirited horse, and still the outlaw urged him on. On over the prairie; on over hill and dale, rushed the flying horseman, his hat blown off and his long raven hair floating back on the breeze, giving him a wild, fantastic appearance.

On—on—on, and the sun sunk lower toward

the golden horizon, like a ball of molten fire. Nature was drowsing lazily a prelude to her nocturnal rest, in the glare of the dying light.

Insects were droning leisurely homeward, and a few night birds had commenced their evening songs.

On—on—on; the sky was glowing in radiant colors, and the breeze was filled with the perfume of honeysuckle and other exquisite flowers.

Away over hills, into valleys, and through rushing streams; on—on, and the foam flew from the flying horse, whose nostrils were dilated and eyes bulging out from its tremendous exertions. And white, nervous, and fearful, Carlos de Monterey sat in his saddle, and watched ahead for the longed-for goal.

On—on, and the seven o'clock train was steaming at the depot in Denver, impatient to dart away over its iron trail through the wilderness, toward the great east. Wild Carlos saw it from the crest of a neighboring hill, and shrieking like a demon he spurred madly toward the station. But no one noticed or heard him. The conductor strode down the platform and yelled "All aboard," there was a scramble for the cars; the bell clanged, the whistle shrieked, and the eastern-bound train moved out of the station, on its journey. And then, when it was out of sight, and it was too late to stop it, Wild Carlos was seen rushing madly up.

CHAPTER XX.

SAVED AFTER ALL—THE BATTLE OF THE TRETTLE-BRIDGE—VICTORY.

"STOP! stop that train for God's sake!" shouted the outlaw, frantically, leaping from his animal onto the platform as the poor beast fell dead at the end of its journey. "Signal it, I say, or every person aboard will be hurled headlong to destruction!"

"What?" cried the station-master, in alarm—"what is this you say?"

"Stop the train!" gasped Wild Carlos; then the blood rushed into his brain, and he fell to the floor, insensible.

"Heavens! what can the matter be?" ejaculated the station-master, bending over the prostrate form. "I reckon he's dead, sure pop."

"No," replied a bystander, tearing open the outlaw's vest, and laying bare his breast, "he has only been overcome by hard riding and excitement. Bring some liquor, somebody, and we'll quickly fetch him to."

"What's all this?—what's the matter?" demanded a tall, portly gentleman hurrying up, he having issued from the depot as Wild Carlos dashed up. "Who have you got here?"

"That we do not know, sir," was the general reply. "It's a man what rid up and yelled fer stop the train or all the passengers'd be hurled he'd foremost inter destruction, an' then he kerflummuxed right down here in a heap, yer honor."

"By George! that is strange. There must be some meaning at the bottom of it, that we cannot fathom," said the new-comer, who was one of the directors of the road. "I say, Duncan, go you and telegraph to the Woodpile and have the train flagged, until we can find out more about this matter. Quick, now, or you will be too late!"

The station-master sprang to his feet and hurried into the depot, while the director aided the others in restoring Wild Carlos to consciousness.

Water was carefully applied to his heated face, and liquor poured down his parched throat, after which the crowd parted to one side and allowed the cool evening breeze to fan his cheeks.

The effect was magical, for after a few seconds the strong man gave a relieved gasp, and sat bolt upright.

"The train! the train!" he articulated, faintly; "oh God! I remember now. I got here too late!"

"On the contrary," said Director Manning, "you came in the nick of time."

"And the train has been flagged and is waiting at the Woodpile!" interrupted the station-master, coming up.

"Oh! God, I thank thee," murmured De Monterey, burying his face in his hands. Then, as he perceived that the director and bystanders were growing impatient, he said:

"Gentlemen, you behold in me one who has long held a reign of terror in the gold regions—Wild Carlos, the Gold Robber. I tell you this that there may be no misunderstanding between us. With my band I have for the past year roamed through this section in quest of wealth. At the same time another gang of desperadoes, who have committed scores of murders where I and my band have never done one, have been residing here, also, and I get the notoriety and credit for their inhuman deeds. They style themselves 'Bloodhounds,' and it is a befitting title.

"Well, but a few nights ago they murdered an old miller in Pompeii's gulch—*saved him to death*—and, now, they have plotted the destruction of this eastern bound train, due at the trestle bridge at midnight!"

"Ha!" gasped the director, paling; "say you so, man? Great Heaven! there are twenty pas-

sengers aboard, and a hundred thousand dollars in gold!"

"So I learned, when by chance I overheard the plan to destroy the train. One of Big Hank's spies, named Jake Corrigan, ascertained that a large consignment of gold to the east was to go out on this train, and the chief and sub-chief laid their plans accordingly. Gentlemen, do you remember, years ago, when a wildcat train on your road ran over a fair young girl who was held upon the track by one of a band of border ruffians?"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Director Manning, excitedly. "I was conductor on that very train, and delivered the headless body to the proper authorities, here in Denver!"

"True, sir, and I have you to thank that I ever received the remains of my affianced wife at all."

"You?"

"Yes, I! The maiden who was sacrificed to prove the worthiness of a would-be member of the Bloodhound Band, that night, was my betrothed, and was to have wedded me on the night subsequent to her frightful death."

"But listen, and I will tell you how these Bloodhounds propose to destroy the train. Each pillar that supports the trestle bridge is long ere this heavily charged with powder, and when the eastern bound train, passes onto the bridge it will be blown to atoms!"

The director shuddered, as the terrible picture of such a railway disaster rose before his mind's eye.

After a moment the outlaw continued:

"I will now tell you how these ruffians can be secured, providing that you will promise me one thing."

"And what is that?"

"This: that if Jake Corrigan is captured, he be turned over to my tender mercies."

"Was he the murderer of your betrothed?"

"He was!"

"Then it shall be as you say."

"Very well. Telegraph for the train to come back. Then, send a locomotive with two cars down the road. When the trestle is almost reached, the cars, which shall be loaded with armed men, will stop, and I will head a rush upon the outlaws. Very few, if any, can escape, as we shall have them at a disadvantage."

"Are you sure the plan will work?" asked the director, anxiously.

"Yes. It cannot fail, as the enemy will not be expecting us."

"Then it shall be executed. Duncan, go quick and telegraph for the express to run back here, at lightning speed. You, Pelverton, go and order out engine Number 2, and see that it is coupled to those three empty cars on the switch. I will go and collect a band of fellows to go along with us."

"Get as many as possible," said the outlaw, as the director hurried away into the town. "We'll need them."

Ten minutes later the eastern bound express came thundering back into Denver, and a crowd of angry passengers poured out from the cars, demanding in sullen tones to know the cause of their delay. The station-master and Wild Carlos soon made known to them the death lying in wait for them at the trestle-bridge, and ten of the men volunteered to go in the attack against the Bloodhounds.

Engine Number Two was coupled to three empty freight cars, and all was in readiness for a start when Director Manning should arrive with his men.

He soon came, accompanied by two-score of armed fellows, for the most part miners, with here and there a sprinkling of citizens and new arrivals. All were hustled into the cars. Wild Carlos and Manning got aboard the locomotive with the engineers, and away shot the train of vengeance into the night, that had now fallen over the scene.

In order to make up for the time lost, so that they would arrive at the bridge by midnight, the engine was let out to the top of its speed, and on they fairly flew.

"I fear that they will hear us coming, and when the train stops to let us off, they will smell a rat and *git!*" said the director, watching the roaring fire in the furnace.

"I have been thinking of that," replied Wild Carlos, "and maybe you are about right. But I think we can fool them, even when they least expect it."

"And how? I can see no way."

"Listen, and I will tell you. When we are within two miles of the bridge, slow down our speed to a creeping pace, and by so doing we can get within a half a mile of the enemy without being heard. Here we will dismount, and steal cautiously around and across into the gully where the Bloodhounds will be, at the time of the explosion. In the meantime the engine with the empty cars can back up the road to the switch, thereby giving us time to reach our destination. Then, the cars in front of the engine, they can be wildcatted down the track toward the bridge, and when 'most there the locomotive can stop, and let the cars go rushing onto the trestle. Of course the explosion will take place, and the bridge will go down with its load,

whereupon the ruffians will rush forward to secure their plunder. Then will be our time to strike!"

"Good! good!" ejaculated Manning, rubbing his hands together in his enthusiasm—"tis a most excellent plan, sir. You are fit to command an army, my friend, with your cleverness of foresight. Of course the loss to the road will be a small item, but the triumph of capturing or killing these inhuman Bloodhounds will repay the loss. The bridge is but a temporary affair at the best, and the cars, being heavily constructed, will stand the fall without much damage to them, I think."

Arrangements were accordingly made, and after a wild, swift ride, the train was slowed down to a snail's pace, when within about two miles of the trestle.

Then they crept silently forward through the pall of gloom, until they were but half a mile distant from the bridge, where the Bloodhounds were doubtless awaiting their coming, exulting in anticipation of an easy victory.

Here a halt was made, and the cars unloaded of their freight of lives.

"Now," said the director, after he had given his instructions to the engineer, "go back to the switch as carefully as you came, and be sure not to come down on us before the lapse of thirty minutes. Then, blaze away, and look out that the locomotive does not go over with the cars!"

The engineer nodded, and a slight jerk at the lever sent the train gliding backward over its iron trail, out of sight in the Stygian gloom.

"Now, form in line and—forward!" ordered Wild Carlos, leading away, out across the prairie toward a belt of timber, which skirted the ravine that the trestle-bridge crossed. "Keep step, and mind that you make no useless noise."

Then away they went, like a grim army through the black night, the outlaw leading at an easy, swinging gait. He was thoroughly conversant with every inch of the country, thereabouts, and had no difficulty in leading the band to a position directly in the rear of the enemy.

Leaving his men in a safe waiting-place, the outlaw bade them remain there until he returned, after which he crept forward on his hands and knees toward the concealment of the Bloodhounds. Soon he gained a spot where he could overlook them, and at the same time overhear what they said.

They were crouching in a little gully contiguous to the ravine, and were only about two hundred yards from the trestle, which loomed up grim and ghostly, in the foreground. A torch held in the hand of the ruffian, Corrigan, lit up the scene with a sickly light, and showed the end of a fusee that was to explode the blasts of powder beneath the pillars of the bridge.

The ruffians had evidently been listening for the express a long time, for Corrigan at last broke out, impatiently:

"Curse the luck!" he growled, taking out and filling his pipe; "w'at in the devil ken keep that train? Must hev broke down, an' busted sumthin', else they'd a-been 'long afore this time. I'll go a plug of Navy thet it's long past midnight."

"I'll take ther plug!" announced one of the Bloodhounds, pulling out a watch, and holding it before the fire. "Et's percisely twelve o'clock by ther ticker."

"Thunder! whar'd ye git thet watch, Bung-hole?" demanded the other, eagerly.

"Whar'd I git it? Wal, I hooked it on my own account, so et don't make no difference ter ye. Ar' ye goin' ter fork over thet Navy?"

"Oh! you go to blazes!" was the warm reply.

Conversation now ceased for a moment, while the ruffians strained their ears to catch a sound of the approaching train. But they were disappointed. Not the first sound came from the distance to announce its coming.

"It beats all—" grunted Corrigan, puffing sullenly at his pipe. "Ther express leaves Denver at seven—and, well, maybe she'll kim along yit."

"Shall we kill all the passengers, or not?" asked one of the men.

"Kill 'em, of course. De'd men tell no tales, an' live ones don' do nuthin' else. I opine the fall frum the trestle wull *about* fix 'em, though, if not quite."

Wild Carlos crept back to where he had left his party.

"They're all there," he said, nodding in the direction whence he came, "and ready for their work. When the explosion occurs, they will probably light their torches and rush forward to secure their plunder. Then, when I give a shrill whistle, draw your revolvers and follow me."

"Your man—Corrigan?" questioned the director. "What about him?"

"None of you are to harm him. I will give him my attention, and if, at the close of the coming battle, you do not see me, you will know that Carlos de Monterey did his country one redeeming service, at least!"

"Hark!" whispered one of the men. All listened, and heard the roar of the coming train; then there was a shrill echoing shriek from the locomotive—the signal that told the director

that the flying cars were coming on and the engine retreating from the danger.

"Now, then, get ready," ordered the outlaw.

"All right!" was the acknowledging response.

The next instant there was a louder roar, and the empty cars shot out upon the trestle.

Then came a vivid, blinding flash, a terrible roaring report, that shook the earth like an earthquake, and, amid the cracking and splitting of mighty timbers, the bridge came crashing downward. Forward dashed the Bloodhounds with yells of triumph, and high above the din rung a shrill whistle and the cry of De Montreux:

"Come on, my hearties, and we'll sweep the hell-hounds from the land!"

Then there was a fierce rush, and, cornered in a tight place, the ruffians turned to defend themselves. Revolvers and rifles cracked and flashed; men yelled and cursed furiously; there was a fierce hand-to-hand conflict; then all was silent.

In the ravine stood a score-and-a-half of bleeding, smoke begrimed victors, with Director Manning at their head. All around them lay the dead and dying. But two were missing, and they were Jake Corrigan and Wild Carlos.

CHAPTER XXI.

END OF LA VERGE AND KITTY AYMER.

MAJOR BLOODGOOD attended Bob back to Pompeii, although his charge fainted again before half of the distance was accomplished, and had to be carried across the major's saddle the rest of the way. At Tupper's his wounds were redressed, and he was put to bed, while restoratives were judiciously applied. It was sunset ere he awakened; but he was then so greatly strengthened and refreshed as to be able to sit up and talk.

"What did you do with the old woman?" he asked of Major Bloodgood, who sat near by. "Was she dead when you found me in her clutches?"

"Yes—or, at least, I think so. We left her where we found her."

"Humph! she was a very tigress, and as stout as a grizzly. She hauled me about unmercifully, and yet something instinctively told me not to do her harm, I know not what."

"You did not silence her, then?"

"No. A rock from the ceiling dropped upon her head, and a corner of the same hit me also, and that is all I know about it."

"How came you to venture into the shaft, my boy?"

"Curiosity impelled me to go down there and find out the truth of the matter about all the spooks and so forth that are reported to have been seen there. As you see, I met a spook that was a match for me."

"I thought that you went to the mill to look after the body of old Wood."

"And so I did, but could not find it, as the buildings have all been burned, and the flood is pouring over the dam. By the way, major, you heard of the gal I rescued from the tight-rope—saw her, didn't you? Well, she is in the colonel's room behind the bar, and I should like to have you ask her to come here a moment."

"You mean Ma Belle?"

"Yes, yes, Ma Belle."

"I am sorry, Robert, but she is not here. The Bloodhounds took her when they sacked the town."

"Great God! major, is this true? Why did you not tell me before?"

"Because I knew that it would do you no good, young man."

"And why not? Had you told me when you first found me, I should have set out in hot pursuit. Now, I shall be very late, and it will be difficult to trail my game."

"There will be no necessity for you to go in search," replied the major. "Already two-thirds of the population of Pompeii are scouring the country in quest of the Bloodhounds. If they fail to uncover them, you could not hope to, could you?"

"I am not so sure about that. If one ball knocks down only one tenpin, it does not signify that the next one will not knock the whole set out of time, does it? It is the same in the present case. If the whole population of Pompeii fails to find the ruffians, it is no sign that I will not unearth them without half trying. Surely I can but make the attempt."

Just then there came a knock at the door, and Colonel Tupper stepped within the apartment with one of his blindest smiles.

"There's a gal below, my dear Robert, as would like to interview you."

"A girl? What girl can want to see me? It isn't Ma Belle?"

"Not by a jugfull. This gal below never see'd the day she war as good looking as Ma Belle; yet she's got news of her."

"What! got news of Ma Belle?"

"So she hinted; leastways, she're one of the bar-gal critters as war stolen away by the Bloodhounds."

"Show her up, then, at once. Perhaps she can tell me where I can find my darling," said the Wildcat.

The colonel bowed obsequiously, and retired, soon to reappear accompanied by no less a personage than Kitty Aymer. Bob bowed coldly

as he beheld the young woman, she who had twice made an attempt upon his life.

She returned the salutation haughtily, and, after dropping into a chair, she turned to the pugilist.

"Mr. Bancroft," she said, her voice trembling slightly, "I have come to beg your forgiveness for the harm I have done you. Will you grant it?"

"Humph! are you not asking a good deal?" asked the Wildcat, sternly.

"Maybe I am, but believe me, sir, I am truly repentant for what I have done. In order to get the papers which hold the secret of my birth, I have been rash enough to raise my hand against my fellow-man. Now, sir, I have it in my power to aid you in finding one who I suspect is doubly dear to you—the fair rope-walker—but I must have your promise of forgiveness for all the wrong I have done you!"

"You are freely forgiven, lady, if your intentions are friendly."

"They are, I assure you. But, first, before we go any further, will you be kind enough to explain what you know of John Cameron—or, as you know him, Robert Beecher?"

"Certainly. It will take but a few words to explain all that is necessary."

"I first met Bob Beecher in St. Louis. He was a wild harum-scarum fellow, and I soon learned that he was no slouch at slinging fists. We, by unanimous consent, consolidated, and many is the lively bout we've had in the past, for exercise. He wa. both clever and obliging."

"He had a great faculty of ingratiating himself into the best society, and finally the news came that he was engaged to the lovely daughter of old General B—. I thought nothing strange of this, considering that he was a lady's man."

"Unfortunately for me, we resembled each other wonderfully, and this, with the similarity of names, led to serious results. Subsequent to his betrothal to the general's daughter, he went to drinking, and the sun scarcely ever set without seeing him more or less intoxicated. I remonstrated with him and tried my best to reform him, but all to no avail."

"He went from bad to worse, and at last came the fearful blow. He murdered the general's daughter—his wife—while she slept, and robbed her. He was drunk at the time, and I think that had it not been for that, he would never have done such a deed. He came to me, and begged of me to screen him from the law—to protect him and hide him out of the reach of the authorities. This I could not do, as you must know."

"To harbor a criminal is second to the crime itself. So I told him I could not grant his request, and he flew into a passion and swore a frightful oath of revenge, after which he fled."

"Soon a friend came to me and advised me to make myself scarce also, as the law might nab me and make me a deal of trouble, on account of my resemblance to Beecher. Profiting by this advice I slid out, and made tracks westward. But it was the worst thing I could have done."

"The hounds of the law trailed me, and ever since I have suffered very serious annoyance by having to dodge about, a fugitive from justice."

"Why did you not deliver yourself up, and prove yourself the wrong man?"

"I had reasons for not doing so—one was, to avoid getting my name in the mouths of anyone, as a suspected murderer. Now, that I have told you this, tell me in return where is the maiden, Ma Belle?"

"I came here to tell you that, or, rather to guide you to the place where she and the other girls are confined."

"When we were taken from here, the ruffians went to a place called Wink's ranch, and locked us all in together, after which they all rode away leaving us alone. I being the lighter one of the lot, proposed that they boost me up so that I could climb out of the chimney, when I would come for help. It was a tight squeeze, but I got out, and here I am."

"How far is it to this place?" asked our hero, rising and pulling on his boots. "We will start at once."

"I cannot say how far it is. I got free about daylight, and have walked and ran alternately every step of the way here, since then."

"How soon do you expect that the ruffians will return to the ranch?"

"Not before to-morrow morning."

"Very well. Major, will you order two horses, and see that this young lady is supplied with food? I will in the meantime get ready."

The major acquiesced, and soon Wildcat Bob was left alone.

He hastily attired himself for the journey, and went down to the bar-room.

Here he found the major and Kitty Aymer partaking of a lunch, and he, being hungry, volunteered to help them dispose of it.

By the time they had finished, three horses were led up to the door, and in answer to the pugilist's inquiring glance, Major Bloodgood said:

"Perhaps it will surprise you, but I am going along."

"Good—I am glad of it, major. We may

need your strong arm before we succeed in getting possession of the girls."

"Ef ye git you're clutches on that Big Hank, jest give him a punch fer me," said ex-confederate Chauncey, as the trio mounted, at the door. "Ye see I 'hain't no particular affection for the ornery cuss, an' I'd jes' 's I've ye'd settle his hash as not."

"I will try and accommodate you," replied the pugilist, laughing, and then they rode away. Kitty took the lead, as neither of the others knew the route to the ranch in question, and soon they were speeding westward, as the shadows of night began to envelop the land.

For a couple of hours they galloped along without interruption, when suddenly, and unexpected as it was sudden, there occurred an event that left Wildcat Bob without equine power of locomotion. With not a moment's warning, a man leaped from a clump of hazel bushes in front of the advancing trio, and raising a pistol, fired.

Whether he intended the bullet for Bob is not for us to say, for instead of him, it struck his horse, and dropped him to the ground—dead!

At the same instant there was another report, and the strange enemy fell, by the hand of Major Bloodgood.

Wildcat Bob quickly disengaged himself from the lifeless horse, and went over to where the dead man lay.

As he gazed into the sinister face, now pale and haggard, he saw that it was the rascally guardian of Ma Belle, the good-for-nothing M. Leek.

"How shall we manage it now?" asked the major, after all had viewed the corpse. "There's three of us, and only two horses. Some one, evidently, will have to go afoot."

"There is no need of that," said Kitty. "Mr. Bancroft can take my place in the saddle, and I will ride behind him, if he has no objections to my clinging to him."

Of course Bob had no objections, and so it was arranged. In short order they were galloping on again, leaving the corpse of Leek on the prairie, to call for it on their return.

Away, over hill and dale they sped, and about midnight Kitty Aymer suggested a halt, as they were in the vicinity of the Wink Ranch, wherein the girls were imprisoned.

Only a small motte of timber intervened between them and the cabin.

"We had better dismount, and leave the horses hereabouts," said the girl, and then we can approach the cabin with more caution, which we shall have need to exercise, as the ruffians may have possibly returned sooner than I expected."

Accordingly they did dismount, and the animals were secured in the edge of the motte. Then the trio set out afoot for the ranch.

Creeping cautiously through the timber, they presently emerged on a piece of prairie on the western side, and beheld, looming up through the gloom, the cabin known as Wink's ranch.

It was a long, low, rambling structure, and had not a very inviting appearance, as viewed through the darkness. It had been built for a trading-post, but never having been a success, had soon been abandoned.

"The doors and windows are all on the further side," said Kitty, as they halted to make observations. "Now, you two men had better creep around one way, while I go the other. If you see a light inside, you may rest assured that some, or perhaps all of the gang are there, as I left strict orders with the girls not to light up, until I returned."

"How many apartments are there in the shanty?" asked the major.

"Only one. The interior is not divided by partitions. Now, let's be moving, as every moment is valuable."

So saying, the young woman flitted off.

Wildcat Bob and the major also moved away, they going around to the right of the cabin and she to the left.

No difficulty was experienced in gaining a front view of the place, and here a strange tableau was presented to the gaze of our friends.

In front of the cabin were planted a dozen or more stakes, to which Ma Belle and the bargirls were individually bound, and Big Hank was seated before them, exulting over their pain and misery.

"Haw! haw! wah! hoo!" roared the giant, "thes ar' fun—ther climaxed summit o' refined amuseement. No harrum done at all, my deer tender sex; et's only one o' my playful freeks o' natur', thet's all. Sumtimes I'm jes' 's fawn an' lamb-like as enny day-old goslin' ye ever see'd, an' I wouldn't no moar kill a pig in yer bewtchful he'ds, than I'd swaller a pint o' tobac'-juice. Then, ag'in, I feel jes' like a rampshush two-year-old colt in fresh clover, an' ken crow better, an' cackle wuss nor enny other Shanghigh chicken in the hull wide universe."

"I'll tell ye who I ar', my festive nimps—I'm ther great Roman president, Nero, an' ye're my Dianners. Ye're my saints, apostles an' beer-slingers. Yas, I'm undoubtedly Nero! Nero ther Grate! Heerd tell o' me in ther joggerfy, ain't ye? I'm ther illustrious, cussed, double-spurred, thick-combed, cacklin' vampire thet sot in ther high turret winder at Moscow, an'

watched ther anti-rumsellers burn ther hamlet. Yes, I'm he, an' more's ther good fer me.

"My name's bin handed down from high posterity, an' is a shinin' light on my anshient family escutcheon. Now, then, my 'arnsome Dianers, et ar' my resolved purpuss ter hev a satisfaction uv kisses afore I sot ye free, an' w'ats ter hinder o' my beginnin' ther saintly ceremonies to one't? Echo answers, in intonashuns faint, 'Wat?' An' I, in accents stentorified, ans'er nothin'. Tharfore, it behooves me to begin immegetly. Wahool! I only wish sum o' ther b'yees war heer ter take a hand in ther refined amooement, 'ca'se I'm afeerd it'll blister my lips ter do all ther delightful smackin'!"

So saying, the ruffian arose from his seat and stepped toward Ma Belle, she being the nearest captive to him. But before he could offer to pollute her with a single touch, Wildcat Bob leaped in upon the scene, and, with the strength of a Hercules, hurled him to the earth.

"You accursed brute!" he cried, planting one foot on the bully's breast; "you inhuman wretch! you have gone quite far enough. Now, that you have run the length of your chain, we will see that you go no further!"

"Hold! do not harm him!" screamed Kitty Aymer rushing up. "Do not kill him. He has the papers that hold the secret of my birth."

"Ha! curse you," foamed the giant, as he caught sight of the girl; "so ye've turned traitor, hev ye? gone back on yer best friend, hev ye? Waal, now, let's see ye get yer clutches on them dockyments, that's all. Ye'll be older nor Methusaler's soup-treen afore ye git 'em, ye can bet yer boots!"

"I will have them!" shrieked Kitty, looking like an infuriated tigress, "and your life in the bargain."

She leaped forward and hurled Wildcat Bob to one side, and the next instant had pounced upon the outstretched form of the ruffian, as if she meant to destroy him. And it soon appeared quite evident that such was her intention, for she clawed and tore at his repulsive face until the blood spurted from it in streams.

He fit her off as best he could, and at last, in an unguarded moment, he whipped a long knife from his belt and drove it to the hilt in her bosom.

With a piteous cry and a dying groan, Kitty Aymer sunk back upon the grass dead! The blow had done its work.

So quickly had it been administered, that neither Bob nor the major had time to prevent it. But now, as he beheld the terrible issue, Wildcat Bob drew a revolver, and sent a bullet crashing the bully's brain.

With a howl of pain and rage he struggled to a sitting posture, but the next instant fell back, a corpse!

Thus ended the career of Hank La Verge, the chief of the inhuman Bloodhounds, and one of the most cruel and unfeeling wretches that ever went toward blackening the criminal record of the great West.

As he sunk back upon the ground a roll of paper slipped from his waistcoat pocket out upon the grass. The major picked it up.

"It is a confession of Robert Beecher, who was recently killed," he said, as he ran over the closely written pages. "It goes to say that you are not guilty of the murder of General B—'s daughter, and— Ha! better it is that the girl yonder is dead, for such a shock as this would have killed her, doubtless, anyhow. In heaven she will be free from the grief that this confession would have caused her on earth. My boy, this Robert Beecher was—" the sentence was finished in a whisper.

Wildcat Bob bowed his head and groaned:

"It is better, then, that she was not alive to learn the story of her shame," he said. "She, at least, was innocent; and I am sure innocent criminals will be crowned saints in the great hereafter!"

"Truly spoken, my boy. But, come; let's free these girls from their bonds."

Bob quickly assented, and naturally turned his attention to Ma Belle, while the major was left to release the other maidens.

"My darling," said the pugilist, as a moment later he was locked in the embrace of the beautiful girl, "I thank God that you have again been restored to me, safe and alive. Without you my life would be a blank!"

And her answering kiss made him think that he had just begun to realize the bright side of life.

As soon as arrangements could be completed, the remains of Kitty and Big Hank were interred under the shadow of the cabin, and then the whole party set out afoot for Pompeii—all except Ma Belle and one of the bar-girls, who were mounted on the two horses.

It was broad daylight ere they arrived at the spot where the scoundrel Leek had fallen. But, strange to say, his body was not there.

Either he had not been killed, as supposed, and had escaped, or some beast of prey had dragged him off. After a careful scrutiny of the ground, Wildcat Bob concluded that he had only been wounded, and had soon after crawled away.

The party again trudged on, the girls alter-

nately taking turns in the saddle, thus making their journey less tedious.

They were within about three miles of the mines, when a party of masked horsemen were discovered bearing down upon them.

The girls were nearly frightened out of their wits, but the pugilist's assurance that all would be right, quieted their fears, and a halt was made to await their approach.

They soon rode up, and as Wildcat Bob had surmised from the first, were a company of De Monterey's Lawless Rangers, under a chosen sub-chief.

"Are you Wildcat Bob?" asked the latter of the pugilist, as he reined in his foam-flecked steed; "he whom our chief calls the Boss Bruiser?"

"I am. You, I presume, come from Wild Carlos, the Gold Robber."

"Wild Carlos, yes—but the Gold Robber no longer. Henceforth the Lawless Rangers will hold forth in Texas, instead of Colorado and the Northwest, and Carlos de Monterey will not control their actions. I shall have the honor to call myself their chief, and I hope to prove as good a commander as Wild Carlos. My name is Chet Dormer."

"Yes. I suppose you have a motive in encountering us?"

"Exactly. I am commissioned by Wild Carlos to hunt you up, and conduct you to the Cave of the Petri; also one Major Bloodgood and a female rope-walker, named Ma Belle."

"All of whom are here. I suppose it is Wild Carlos' Life Drama we are to witness, is it not?"

"I believe it is. Here are saddled horses for you three. Mount and let's be off. One of my men can see these girls safe to Pompeii."

And so it was arranged. In less than an hour the outlaws and our friends were far away toward the north.

CHAPTER XXII.

WILD CARLOS' LIFE DRAMA—CONCLUSION.

ONE more scene, dear reader, and the curtain falls to close this truthful picture of 'occasional' life in the mines and out of them.

A long cavern in the solid rock, hung with many fancifully ornamented skins, and lighted by myriads of flaring torches, is the scene to which we would draw the general attention.

And such a scene!

Here in this cavern are many faces that we recognize, for the owners of them have figured more or less all through this veracious narrative.

This audience is ranged along the wall of the cavern, on one side, like a class of scholars, while along the opposite side is also posted another line of persons—Chet Dormer's Lawless Rangers.

In the center of the apartment is a desk facing the first-mentioned line of faces, and behind it is seated, on an elevated stool, a dark, half-gipsyish man, with long flowing hair and mustache, of the raven's hue, who is busily engaged writing and reading from a roll of manuscript.

Commencing at the left hand, we will carefully go over the cast of characters, and see if we know them all.

First is a man,—one whose face and form are perfection,—the face being nobly handsome, and the physical developments of form something extraordinary. His name is Robert Bancroft, alias Wildcat Bob, notable for his pugilistic skill in battle.

His face now wears a placid expression, and it is quite evident that he is not a prisoner against his will.

He is at the head of the line. Next to him stands a maiden—a beauteous blonde, noticeable for the gay, vivacious expression of her bright countenance and the perfectness of her form. Suggestive and yet appropriate is her name—Ma Belle.

Next to her is another man—as stalwart, good-natured looking a fellow as you often come across, but just now a pallor is resting on his features that bespeaks of a sickness of but recent date, that left his constitution somewhat impaired. We make no difficulty in recognizing him as Thorpe Bloodgood.

By his side is a piquant little maiden, whose mouth and eyes are expressive of a resolute will when pressed beyond the bounds of reason.

She, too, is a blonde, and when she changed her name from Amber Seton to Amber Bloodgood, she made a good choice.

Next to her stands the modest little flower of the flock, rosy, bright and lovable—Iris Wood. It has been some time since we have seen her, but in that lapse, she seems to have grown only the more charming and graceful. Ever and anon the dark eyes of the man at the desk seek her face, and she meets the gaze with a pretty blush and a drooping of the eyelids that tell where her heart is.

Beyond her we come to a sturdy, beaming-faced gentleman, with a high forehead and a florid complexion, and in Major Bloodgood we behold a man of standard good principle associated with a considerable bump of speculative-ness. Age has touched him but lightly, for the major is to-day "just as young as he used ter was!"

Two more yet, and the line of characters terminate. Next to the major, we behold a man

whose face wears a look both savage and hunted. His eyes burn with restless fire, and the expression on his visage is not the most pleasant.

It is Charles Seton, and when last we saw him he was teeth deep in the quicksand in Frog Paradise.

Things have changed since then, however.

Last in the cast is Jake Corrigan, perhaps the most cruel and heartless man of the two or three-score who held a reign of terror under the name of the Bloodhounds. Age has made his hair as white as the snow on the crest of the sierras, and liquor and general depravity have embellished a likeness of his black heart in his furrowed, repulsive face; yet he stands on the verge of the grave, a sullen bull-dog look on his visage, that very plainly delineates how little he fears his God and His judgments.

True, some ruffians are ignorant and in a good measure pardonable, but you can generally distinguish an ignorant ruffian from an educated one.

Corrigan ends the cast.

Of the rangers on the opposite side of the cavern we need say nothing, as they will figure no more in this life drama.

The man at the desk is De Monterey. He is arranging the curtains that are to rise and reveal what has hitherto been comparatively unknown.

For perhaps an hour the cavern is wrapt in silence; then the handsome outlaw looks up.

"The date of this drama we will place back at the beginning of a former generation. I have here before me documentary evidence of part of what I am about to say, the documents having been obtained from the following persons in the affixed order:

"No. 1 was procured through the agency of one of my spies; is the life confession of Thomas Lamonte, and was obtained, together with twenty-three gold nuggets, from a place where both were hidden by an old miller, William Wood by name. In this manuscript I have been able to find that which has rendered further knowledge necessary of the case in hand:

"Document Number 2 was obtained years ago from Robert T. Bancroft, it being the only thing found on his person, when a baby he was found in the streets of Chicago. He confided it to my care, when I promised to search out the origin of his parentage. That I think I have successfully done.

"Number 3 was found on the body of a woman, who in an insane condition came to me about a month since, and sought my protection.

"The fourth and fifth documents are of but recent writing, and are signed by Thorpe C. and Major Anderson Bloodgood; yet they enable me to get at the bottom of the whole affair; and as this is not an acting drama, and only one character speaks, the position of relator has been assigned to me, and I will endeavor to enlighten my audience to the best of my ability.

"We will begin at the beginning, and drop the curtain at the close.

"One generation ago, there resided in the picturesque little village of Bath an aged farmer, his wife, and a family of two stalwart sons.

"These sons were christened Charles and Thomas Lamonte, and grew to manhood two as enterprising young fellows as often you meet with. Their father started them both in business, and they prospered.

"Thomas was a good-natured, easy-going fellow, and was the more esteemed of the twain, for Charles was habitually irritable and close-fisted, and not, as a general thing, a favorite among his fellow-men. At last came the time that both young men fell in love with a maiden of their native village, whose name was Myra Bloodgood.

"Both were perhaps equally honest and sincere in their affection, yet Myra loved only one, and Thomas Lamonte was the lucky man. They were betrothed, and when Charles learned the fact a terrible scene ensued, in which the disappointed suitor showered curses and threats on his brother rival and the beauteous Myra.

"But this did not deter the happy couple from consummating their vows in the bans of holy wedlock.

"After the marriage, and when the husband and wife were happily settled in their home, Charles Lamonte came to them and humbly begged their forgiveness, which, they believing him truly repentant, was freely granted.

"From that day the outraged brother took up his residence with the husband and wife, and soon he had apparently forgotten the love for Myra Bloodgood, in the esteem of his affectionate sister-in-law.

"At the end of the year old Mr. Lamonte died, and then came another rupture. The whole of the old family estates had been willed to Thomas, leaving only an insignificant pittance for Charles, which was barely sufficient to purchase his cigars.

"There was a long lawsuit subsequently, and although Thomas Lamonte offered no objection why his brother should not share the wealth, the will was a powerful advocate, and the result was that Charles was finally cut off without a penny, more than what had been left him in the last will and testament of his father.

"After this, although Charles still remained

a member of his brother's family, it was evident he bore him no good will, and sundry little spats were had, that rendered the family life anything but desirable. Finally, Thomas got the gold-fever, and leaving his property under Charles' control, he set out for the mines.

"For awhile everything went along all right; then there reached his ears, through some of his eastern business acquaintances, hints that his wife and Charles Lamonte were suspiciously intimate.

"Myra wrote regularly, but there was nothing in her letters to further these suspicions in her husband's mind. He had left one child on his departure—a bright little fellow, the very likeness of its mamma, and Myra wrote that he was doing nicely.

"Four years Thomas Lamonte remained in the mines, and then he returned home on a short furlough from duty. Here he was warmly greeted, and after a month of rest and enjoyment, he again set out for the golden West, carrying the image of his loving wife before his eyes.

During his stay home, he found that Charles had married and was the father of one child, and that there was no truth in the hints against his wife's unfaithfulness.

"Two years passed by, and still Thomas Lamonte lingered in the mines; he was acquiring a fortune, he told his wife, in the numerous letters he sent home. But, after awhile, the letters from Myra came few and far between. She said a little girl had been born her since her husband's visit; that Charles Lamonte's wife and child had died, and that he was coming West.

"Then came a long lapse of time during which the toiling husband heard not a word from home. Anxiety at last took root in his mind, and leaving his mine he was about to start for home when the mails brought him that which deterred his course of action.

A letter came from one of his former acquaintances—a letter stating that Myra, his wife, who had long been suspected of being criminally intimate with Charles Lamonte, had disappeared with her children; that said Charles had disposed of the property, and fled, also.

"Now this was not true. That letter was penned by the hand of Charles Lamonte, himself, and Mrs. Lamonte was at the time living quietly in her home. Every week she wrote to her husband, but did not receive her expected answer.

"One day Charles Lamonte came to her with a letter purporting to have been written by the absent brother, and in it was an order to convert all the estates into money, and place the cash for the same in Mrs. Lamonte's hands. This, said Thomas Lamonte, would maintain her and the children as long as they would live, and, as he should never return, he took this last opportunity to bid them a farewell, forever.

"Of course this was a forgery, but it nearly broke the poor wife's heart. Charles Lamonte did as directed, and soon Mrs. Lamonte was in possession of a princely sum of money. Then it was that she, her children, and Charles Lamonte disappeared.

"The beautiful wife of Thomas Lamonte was placed in a private insane asylum, the children lost in a great western city, and with the fortune in his own hands, Charles Lamonte fled.

"The children were lost, we say, in a great western city. Here we make an error. One of them—the boy—was dropped in Chicago; the girl was adopted by one of Charles Lamonte's employees, who, late in life, came West.

After the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Lamonte and the children, her brother, Major Anderson Bloodgood, and his family came West, and spared no pains or money to find some clue to their whereabouts, they suspecting that they had come out here in search of Thomas Lamonte.

"We now permit a lapse of years to go by, and we raise the curtain on another act of the drama.

"Since last we saw him, Thomas Lamonte, a heart-broken man, has wandered about the world, and at last, one day, he comes upon a cottage in a wild gulch, where there is a large dam and a silent mill.

"He sees a maiden at her work; he watches her, unobserved, for nearly an hour, and then goes away convinced that at least he has found one of his children.

"But, strange man that he is, he cares not to claim them after all these years. He has found the boy, long ago, and now he has seen the girl. He goes away. A month later he returns and purchases a worthless mine of old Bill Wood. Not long is he gone, ere he returns to the miller's cabin, learns that that Iris Wood is in reality Iris Lamonte, leaves her a legacy of gold and a death confession, and dies. The miller hides the legacy and the confession, but is seen to do so by Wild Carlos' spy, and thus Wild Carlos obtains possession of the document, the gold, and finally, of Iris Wood herself.

"Some time before this, a crazy woman—horrible and repulsive—came to me and sought my protection. It was granted, and I have here a confession or rather a testimonial, written by her, while in the mad-house, where Charles La-

monte placed her, which goes to state that she was once Myra Bloodgood; that she was wedded to Thomas Lamonte; that his brother placed her in an asylum, and she ends by saying that she feels that her keepers are driving her mad by their inhuman treatment.

"We must here surmise that she escaped from the mad-house, and has wandered West in search of her husband."

"And who am I?" asked Wildcat Bob, his face paling as he remembered the struggle in the mine.

"You are Robert Bancroft Lamonte," replied Wild Carlos. "In your father's confession, here, he states that he traced you out as far as Chicago where you were reared to the age of seventeen by a man named Bancroft; you ran away at that age, and he could trace you no further. But by the aid of this paper you gave me, some months ago, I learn that you were not Bancroft's own child, which, with what I have learned from Thomas Lamonte's confession, convinces me that you are his son."

"And the old hag—is she my mother?"

"She is—or rather was, for she is now dead, poor woman."

"Dead! Great God! then I am her murderer. She attacked me in the Haunted Mine, and we fit till both were insensible. When I was rescued she lay like one who was dead."

"True; but you did not kill her. She came to this cavern on the night subsequent to her battle with you, and told me all about it. Her death was the result of her own imprudence. In the interior of yonder niche, which you perceive at the end of this cavern, is another cave, which is endowed with marvelous power. A stick or a human body left there one hour will be turned to stone."

"Miss Iris, yonder, will recollect how the body of Thomas Lamonte was found to have disappeared from her home. I ordered the secret removal of that body, and it now rests in the cave of petrification, preserved in a stone state. I suppose that it was to view this that poor Myra Lamonte entered the cavern; at least, she went in there, and her statue now stands bending over the form of her silent husband."

"Thank God her life is not on my hands," said the Wildcat, bowing his head in reverence. Then, after a moment, he added: "Then she who has hitherto gone under the name of Iris Wood is really my long-lost sister?"

"She is. Major Bloodgood is your uncle, his son is your cousin, and his son's wife is also your cousin. Yonder wretch, Charles Seton, alias Charles Lamonte, is your uncle, and to him you owe a debt of gratitude for all the wrong he has done you and yours. Major Bloodgood tells me that Charles Lamonte has a wife and child, the latter being now the wife of the major's son."

"He further states that he and Lamonte have lived neighbors for the past few months, but, until he could learn something of his lost sister, he had forbore to tell the villain that he had been recognized. The conviction has grown upon the major of late that Lamonte had murdered his sister, and he was waiting to obtain some proof to that effect, ere he should strike an avenging blow. In the meantime Thorpe, his son, has wedded yon villain's child to get her from under his care."

"A chase was given them by Charles Lamonte and a gang of ruffians, which resulted in the former's being dashed over a waterfall into my camp, and the latter being rescued from the quicksand by myself."

There was a few moments' silence; then Wild Carlos continued:

"I have explained, my friends, all that is within my power, save the confession of old Bill Wood, which amounts to little or nothing, further than it goes to say that he received Iris Lamonte from Charles Lamonte, and that he has all these long years known that the wife of Thomas was incarcerated in a mad-house. Is there anyone among you who wishes to ask any questions that are not clear in their minds?"

There was no answer. There were none who did not understand how matters stood. Wild Carlos presently resumed:

"Before dropping the curtain over my so-called life-drama, I have a few words to say in regard to my own actions in the past."

"I am a Creole by birth, and a native of the State of Mississippi. Years ago, when I was just entering my majority, I became enamored of a young Northern lady, who was visiting at a plantation adjacent to my father's, and she reciprocated my affection. But my father, one of those stern old blue-blooded gentlemen of the South, angrily disapproved of my choice, and threatened to disinherit me if I paid any further attention to the daughter of the hated North."

"My temper was as fiery as his, and with the girl I fled into the furthest part of Kansas. Here I took up land, built me a cabin, while Jessie, the maiden of my choice, returned to her Northern home, where she was soon to come into the possession of a large fortune; but she promised to come back to me and become my

wife when she attended to the legal settlement.

"In the mean time I became a leader in a vigilante band, and made perhaps more enemies than friends, for the men I had to deal with were a brutal class of border ruffians."

"One man in particular, whose name was Jake Corrigan—yonder stands the wretch now—held a grudge against me, and the night that my Jessie returned, and on the eve of our marriage, stole her away from me and fled."

"Some of you perhaps remember the tragedy that occurred on the Denver road some five years ago, when a beautiful girl was run over while being held to the track by a ruffian; that ruffian was, I have since learned, taking the initiatory pledge of admittance into the Brotherhood of Bloodhounds. Well, from the day, or rather night, of that tragedy, I became an outlaw. I shot a man in a Topeka saloon, whom I had cause to think was the murderer of my Jessie, and that set the judgment of the law against me; since then I have cared little what became of me, except that I have wanted to live for revenge. The man I killed was a ruffian, and deserved death, although he was innocent of the crime I accused him of. Yonder stands Jessie's murderer, and by high Heaven I swear he shall suffer for his inhuman deed. *He shall die in the cave of petrification!*"

All eyes were turned upon Corrigan as Wild Carlos passed this sentence, but he was not visibly affected. The same sullen, bull-dog look was on his visage, and a burning gleam of hatred in his eyes.

"If you please," said Wildcat Bob, stepping forward, leading Ma Belle by the hand, "this young lady, who is my betrothed wife, wishes to ask you if you ever had a claim of cousinship to a certain southern family named Vincent, who resided in the next state to you?"

De Monterey started violently, and gazed at Ma Belle searchingly; then he stepped quickly forward with extended hands.

"Is it possible?" he ejaculated, "that you are Mabel Vincent—the beautiful cousin of whom I have heard so much, and yet never seen?"

"I am Mabel, yes, sir," replied the rope-walker, coyly. "I have heard terrible stories of my outlaw cousin, and the moment I saw you I was satisfied that you were he!"

"The bloody stories are not true, dear cousin. Outlawing, I do not deny. And now, when the cloud has been lifted from so many lives, I feel that we ought to be doubly grateful to our God, and let the curtain fall over a tableau of reunion and happiness!"

A few more words will end the tale.

On Amber's account Charles Lamonte was set at liberty, with the warning that if he was ever seen again he would be arrested and tried for his crimes. For he was guilty of many, Corrigan confessed, an hour previous to his death, in the cave of Petri.

As for Charles Seton, he was the head spirit in the band of Bloodhounds—a sort of king, in fact—and always received his share of their spoil. At the time of the tragedy resulting in Jessie's death, he commanded the band, but had shortly after been succeeded by Hank La Verge.

According to the sentence passed upon him, Corrigan died in the cave.

Three weeks later there was a grand wedding in a principal hotel of St. Louis. Wildcat Bob and Wild Carlos were the bridegrooms, and we will leave the reader to guess who were the brides.

Subsequent to entering the matrimonial state, Bob made haste to cancel his engagement with Col. Tupper, who, as soon as the mining days were over, left the bar to become a successful stock raiser.

The wife of the worthless Charles Lamonte was cared for by the Bloodgoods, and the estate turned over to Robert and Iris Lamonte, as they were deemed rightfully heirs.

And is not this

THE END?

* This cavern is still declared to exist in the vicinity of Lennox, Col., by men whose veracity is undoubted.—AUTHOR.

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